

## Adrift

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org/works/854646) at <http://archiveofourown.org/works/854646>.

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### Category:

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### Fandom:

[My Chemical Romance](#)

### Relationship:

[Frank Iero/Gerard Way](#), [One-sided Brendon Urie/Gerard Way](#), [Past Frank Iero/Jamia Nestor](#), [Past Frank Iero/OMC](#)

### Character:

[Frank Iero](#), [Gerard Way](#), [Mikey Way](#), [Ray Toro](#), [Brendon Urie](#), [Patrick Stump](#)

### Additional Tags:

[Explicit Language](#), [Sexual Content](#), [Supernatural Elements - Ghost](#), [References to Suicide](#), [Mentions of past alcohol abuse/depression](#), [Dead Character](#), [Implied homophobia](#)

### Language:

[English](#)

### Collections:

[Bandom Big Bang 2013](#), [My Chemical Romance](#) ► [Frank Iero / Gerard Way](#)

### Stats:

Published: 2013-06-23 Words: 31248

# Adrift

by [orphan\\_account](#)

## Summary

When successful author Gerard Way is forced to do something drastic to spur on his creativity, he decides to move out of the city. He buys an old villa in the small town of Kellmington and is satisfied with that, until he discovers that it's already inhabited by one of the former residents: a persistent ghost. To have a dead spirit around is certainly not what he paid for, but Gerard soon learns that the ghost has its own story – a story that might lead him to a life-changing plot twist.

## Notes

Written for [Bandom Big Bang 2013](#). Thanks to the mods for running the challenge, and massive thanks to [Mutiny](#) for all the support and input, as always, and to Mai who quickly beta'd this for me. Links to art and mix at the end of the work!

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

“Oh. Uh... Wow.”

Mikey leans against the open door of the car and peers doubtfully up at the large house. It's old, to say the least, despite all the traces from previous restorations. It has been given a somewhat recent coat of gray paint underneath the thin chains of wild ivy, and staring down at them are two rows of narrow windows, each consisting of six small panes. Two bricked chimney pipes are jutting up from the shingled roof and a small porch fronts the left side of the house, while several tall trees seem to embrace it in a half circle from behind.

Gerard turns to smile at his younger brother. “Is that a good or a bad ‘wow’?”

Mikey hesitates. “I... I don't know, to be honest. It looks kinda... old.”

“Well, it was built around 1780 or something,” Gerard replies lightly and heads towards the house, gravel crunching beneath the soles of his Converse. “I guess it should look a bit old.”

“The eighteenth century, Gerard? You're kidding, right?”

“Wait until you see the inside of it,” he says excitedly, ignoring the skeptical tone in Mikey's voice and fishing the keys out of his pocket. “Both the kitchen *and* the upstairs bathroom have been renovated, plus I'm getting a new septic installed in a couple of weeks.” He glances around with a wide grin before he opens the door. “Look – I've got a fuckin' porch!”

“You're too young to be living *alone* in a house this old,” Mikey mutters as they step into the entrance hall. “And what about wintertime?” he adds, as if that settles everything for an escape straight back to city life. “You're gonna be shoveling snow from December and throughout March. And I bet there'll be constant power outages and –”

“Mikey –” Gerard interrupts him with an exasperated sigh. “I promised myself I wouldn't get mad at you because I really need and appreciate your help right now, but could you *please* shut the fuck up? If it makes you feel any better I'm planning on getting one of these snow thrower... blower... whatever things. And I've got electricity, an internet connection *and* hot water. I don't see the problem.” He reaches out and gives his brother a pat on the shoulder. “Now

welcome the moving guys while I check the place out, okay?”

Without waiting for a reply Gerard leaves a doubtful Mikey and goes exploring. He's only been at the Allman-house once before and that was for the viewing, which had been sometime back in November. It looked entirely different back then, a little abandoned and gloomy, like a forgotten movie location towering against the backdrop of the dark woods. This time it's wrapped in the delicate arms of early April. The place looks much more spacious and welcoming in its old-fashioned layout, though maybe that's just because it finally has a new owner. Empty houses always seem to perk up when people move in.

Gerard makes his way through the entrance hall and into the living room. The hall is large, with plenty of room for a dresser, a few chairs and a carpet, while an old-fashioned fireplace is the first sight to greet him in the living room. The rest of the area holds enough space for all of his furniture and more so; he might even have to head out to the neighboring town and buy a new couch. The sun slips perfectly through the veranda doors, creating wide patches of light on the hardwood floor.

The next door brings him to the kitchen. There is a second, smaller fireplace there with room for a dining table next to it, and the joists above the kitchen island are thick and slightly lowered. The windows are large floor-to-ceiling panels, a modern-day addition, and combined with the overall wood and brick design it creates a naturally rural and intimate atmosphere. The room is pretty much made for late, lazy breakfasts.

Gerard takes a brief look inside the downstairs bathroom, which seems in good condition despite the lack of renovation, and he also successfully locates the door to the basement, which leads straight into a pitch black hole that smells of mold and dirty rainwater. He pulls the dangling string attached to the naked light bulb and peers down the narrow staircase. Gerard assumes the water heater is down there and that's something he should check out for sure, but the clumps of hardened dust and the sticky clusters of spider web makes him close the door with a shudder.

Instead he heads upstairs, the old narrow floorboards creaking and complaining underneath his feet. He finds the master bedroom as well as two large guest rooms, where the smallest one can easily be turned into his new study. He gives the last couple of doors a try – one belongs to the new bathroom and one opens up to the attic – before he steps back inside his empty bedroom. It has a perfect view to the

backside of the house and the huge garden. A lush and towering scarlet oak is rooted among an array of smaller trees and bushes, providing plenty of shadow to a slate patio. From there a narrow bricked path winds through the garden and leads to a small brook at the outskirts of the property.

“Shit, I have a *garden*,” Gerard mutters to himself, struck by an overwhelming feeling of awe. “I’m gonna have to buy flowers now.”

“You alright?”

He turns around to find Mikey lingering in the doorway, sporting an expression of mild concern. The sound of stomping feet and a few shouted directions can be heard downstairs, revealing that the moving people have arrived with his furniture.

“Yeah, totally.” Gerard smiles. “Why wouldn’t I be?”

“So, Kellmington...” His brother pronounces the name of the town with one eyebrow curved into a doubtful arch. “You know, I looked it up and barely two thousand people live here. You’re not exactly used to this.” He folds his arms across his chest. “You *sure* it’s the right decision?”

Gerard turns around with a roll of his eyes, thinking *Here we go again*. It’s not the first time Mikey tries getting into the old debate about Gerard being lonely. Or scared. Or desperate. Or whatever the popular assumption is this time. And Mikey is definitely not the only one; Gerard has been told something like that over and over by several family members for months. It’s the number one hit among broken records. Ever since he announced the move everyone have slowly turned into hobby-psychologists, determined to figure him out.

Yet no one seems to understand that he’s moving because he fucking *needs* it. Too many things have happened and changed his life over the past few years – writing three successful books and becoming sober being part of those things. His problem with living in the city is the distraction it creates; he can’t focus or concentrate on anything there, not with the rushed chaos constantly intervening with his thoughts. With a new project in the works he needs to know that he can count on his own head. It’s not that he wants to become *that* eccentric author, the one who leaves everything for the sake of a reclusive life, but he was bound to do something like this sooner or later. It’s a necessity and deep down his family knows that too.

Gerard shrugs one shoulder in response, feeling like he’s reached a

certain point where these skeptical comments do nothing but annoy him, no matter their good intentions.

“Mikey, I’m one hundred percent sure about this and what I don’t know about living out here I’ll just learn as I go. It’s not even that far from home anyway,” he adds as an afterthought. “I can come visit you guys whenever I want.”

“We just drove for almost three hours though,” Mikey says, still not convinced. “Goes without saying that’s not gonna happen every other weekend.”

“I could just as well have bought a villa in Spain or something. A three hour drive isn’t all that much when you think about it.”

“Bottom line is... we’re all gonna miss you,” his brother replies with a resigned sigh. “No one wants you to be lonely up here or anything.”

Gerard can understand perfectly well that his family is going to miss him. The move was sudden and maybe a bit worrying, but his priorities are what they are: his work, first and foremost, and then his work again. That’s how it’s going to stay, probably for the rest of his life, and it’s the way it should be if he wants everything to return to normal. Gerard is pretty sure that the way to go is through the sufficient mastery of writing.

He turns back around with a reassuring smile. “I won’t be lonely, Mikes. This isn’t outer space or anything. It’s just the countryside.”

A shattering noise reaches them from downstairs and interrupts their conversation, followed by the moving guys snapping angrily at each other. “I’ll go check it out,” Mikey mumbles. “Fucking idiots.”

Towards the late hours of the evening the sky shifts from sunny to cloudy. It’s pouring down by the time Gerard has sorted through the last cardboard box and he casually ignores Mikey’s comments on how ‘you never get this moody fucking weather in the city’.

They’re getting ready to turn in for the night when Gerard’s eye is suddenly caught by the vague silhouette of a person standing in the driveway. He stops and squints as he leans closer to the cold windowpane. It looks like a boy – or rather a young man; it’s just his height and the distance that makes him appear a lot smaller. Gerard frowns. The stranger must be soaked to the bone and he wonders how come he isn’t freezing his ass off out there in the cold rain. He wonders why he’s even standing there in the first place, immovable

and staring up at the house. It's creepy, more than anything.

"Hey, Mikey...?" Gerard begins absently, not taking his eyes off the young man. "Someone's out there."

"This late?" Mikey comes over and nudges him out of the way. He cranes his neck and peers out of the window, looking this way and that, but in the end he only takes a step back and shrugs. "Where?"

Gerard throws a sideways glance at his brother's puzzled face. "Right *there*," he insists with a small laugh. "You seriously can't see –" He turns his attention back to the driveway and cuts himself off when he realizes that it's empty. The only thing visible out there is the dark outline of their cars, nothing more.

Mikey chuckles and reaches out to pat his back. "You should go to bed, bro. I bet you're exhausted from having carried boxes all day."

"But..." Gerard stares unsurely back at his confused reflection. "I could have sworn someone was standing there."

"We'll check for footprints in the morning," Mikey replies encouragingly. "Maybe it was one of the locals lurking around, you never know with people around here. Now go to sleep, okay? See you in a few hours."

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Gerard wakes up in the middle of the night for no particular reason. He fights sleep, not quite sure where he is, until a distant thunderclap prods insistently at his consciousness. He opens his eyes with a low grunt and squints into the bluish shadows of his unfamiliar bedroom. He lies there for a while, feeling increasingly uneasy. The new surroundings must be getting to him.

He groggily struggles out of bed, shuddering as his bare feet touches the cold floor. Judging from the soft tapping on the roof it's still raining and the heavy clouds hardly allow for any moonlit disturbances at all. He weaves his way past half-opened cardboard boxes as gracefully as he can, although in his semi-unconscious state it doesn't take long before he accidentally kicks one of them. A jolt of pain shoots through his big toe and he curses loudly as he limps across the hallway.

Gerard ends up stumbling into the closest guest room, where he nearly trips over another open box. He manages to regain his balance and

lets out a quiet laugh, shaking his head at himself before carefully navigating his way through the room. Out of the corner of his eye he spots his jacket and realizes he must have forgotten it there earlier. He reaches for it, patting the pockets until he locates his cigarettes and lighter. He opens the window a fraction and has a smoke as he watches the steady rain, absently thinking about how his life has unfolded.

Gerard isn't sure exactly *how* he managed to end up on the bestselling lists. He originally did comics and was fine with that, until he tried turning one of the plots he worked on into a short story and discovered he was pretty good at it. He started writing a few things and slowly constructed a world of his own, someone joked about sending his stuff to a publisher, he pursued the idea because he figured it wouldn't hurt and that was it. So far he's published three bestselling novels and signed a movie deal for the third one, which is quite an accomplishment his mid-thirties taken into consideration. Gerard isn't even sure he deserves the recognition, but most likely it's that out-of-nowhere success that had him labeled as brilliant in the first place. The critics tend to speak of him as some sort of strange genius, the fortunate Gerard Way who burst out of his cubicle job by means of pure talent. This happened already at twenty-eight and honestly Gerard has been enjoying it less and less ever since. Sometimes it feels like the media and even his most avid readers are waiting for him to take the final Poe-esque step and go mad, because that's just the price you have to pay for feeling creative. Creativity obviously isn't worth much without a little bit of clinical insanity.

He turns around and studies the contorted shadows surrounding him, leaning over to halfheartedly look through the nearest open box. It contains several folders of discontinued scripts and sketches, and a closer look confirms that they all date back to when his career started going downhill. He always left things *unfinished*, trapped within the threatening expectations of having to live up to his success. He was confused in the wake of his popularity, too unprepared to deal with it, and he soon fell into what started out as writer's block and ended up in depression.

Gerard picks up another folder at random; it holds a bunch of court documents and he quickly puts it back, shuddering a little. Those are the consequences of his success, written on paper. Back then he could have ended up killing either himself or someone else. That night when he drove under the influence and crashed his car he had nothing but pure luck sitting next to him in the passenger seat. Luck sentenced him to only a few months in jail instead of several years behind bars.



Luck made sure he remained an alcoholic instead of becoming a murderer. Luck helped him get clean instead of relapsing as soon as he got out of rehab. Luck made him lose his driver's license for a year instead of losing his life. He's been beyond lucky.

Now he's managed to pull both his career and his life together, and he's moving out here so he can finish his new book in peace. Gerard sighs heavily at the thought of it. Truth is he hasn't really started writing yet, and it's been a while since the last time writing was fun. So far he's only managed to construct a halfhearted draft with 'The Umbrella Academy' as a working title. It's been tucked away in a folder for a while now and Gerard feels a small sting of guilt whenever he sees the attached note of encouragement; it's from his publisher, Patrick, whose unconditional faith in him makes him feel unworthy sometimes. For the sake of everything, Gerard really hopes this is going to work out and that he'll eventually come out of this feeling satisfied, no matter how bad his writer's block is at the moment. He doesn't want to face the same terrifying indifference he'd felt after watching the movie-adaption of his last book, which was a huge success. During the premiere he just stood there on the red carpet feeling like he'd betrayed everyone because he wasn't really that excited about it. He doesn't want to end up in the same dead-end rut of battling drunken demons either. Maybe more than anything he doesn't want to regret the decision of buying the Allman-house. This place is meant to serve as his inspiration and sanctuary and in many ways it's his last shot at regaining some sense of normalcy in his life. If it fails Gerard doesn't know what he's supposed to do.

A shuffling sound reaches him from the pitch-dark hallway, like hurrying footsteps, and his heart skips a startled beat. He looks up and stares across the room, half-expecting someone to actually emerge from the emptiness.

"Mikey...?" His voice is small in the quiet room. "Mikey, is that you?"

The response is nothing but rainy silence and another distant thunderclap, muffled by Gerard's racing heartbeats. For several moments he stays there by the window, completely frozen. When nothing happens, no further noise and no unexpected company, he forces himself to take a deep breath and blames it on sleep deprivation and his overactive imagination.

*Built around 1780*, he reminds himself as he distractedly stubs his cigarette out and heads back to bed. *The house is allowed to settle.*

“Hey, look what I found.”

It's been four days since Gerard moved in and Mikey needs to get back home to his job. He walks out of the kitchen carrying a small silver tray with what appears to be a six-piece porcelain coffee set. Gerard puts his laptop aside and leans forward to check it out. The porcelain is simple and white, apart from a blue and gold ribbon etched around the brim of the cups and the edges of the saucers.

“They were tucked away in one of the kitchen cabinets,” Mikey says with a small shrug. “Kinda pretty, right?”

“Kinda... Think they're valuable?”

“Maybe...” His brother picks up one of the cups and squints thoughtfully at it. “I wouldn't know. I mean, they're *old* but it's not like they're necessarily valuable for that reason... You could ask an antique dealer about it, if you're really interested. Shame about this one though,” he adds, picking up another cup and handing it to him.

Gerard turns it over in his hand. The porcelain feels paper-thin against his fingertips though it's much sturdier than it looks. This particular one seems to have been shattered at one point and then meticulously glued back together. There are narrow yellowing trails scarring the white surface, while a large chip is missing, creating a sharp, jagged hole in the aging porcelain.

“You want them?”

Gerard thinks about it before he scrunches his nose up with a shake of his head. “Nah, but the Salvation Army probably does. Just leave them on the kitchen counter for now.”

And that's where the coffee set remains for the next couple of weeks; on the kitchen counter. Gerard forgets all about it, absorbed in sorting through boxes as well as the occasional restoration project (which usually never amounts to much besides chipping away some flaky paint from a windowsill here and there). It's not until he walks into the kitchen one late afternoon that he remembers their existence.

He stops in the door, his eyebrows pulled together and his head tilted, entirely aware of the fact that something is out of place, and it takes him a little while before he notices. The silver tray is still standing where Mikey left it but the saucers have been stacked into a neat

tower, while every single one of the porcelain cups have been lined up perfectly – almost frighteningly so – on the counter.

Gerard stares, dumbfounded. He's got no idea how this happened or what it's even supposed to mean. He's had no visitors dropping by yet and as far as he knows he's not much of a sleepwalker. He hesitates for a moment before he cautiously moves the delicate cups back, intent on not making a sound. Gerard's hand lingers on the broken cup and he brushes his thumb thoughtfully over the jarred crack, trying to retrace his steps over the past few days but nothing adds up. He decides to wave the whole thing off as extreme absentmindedness. He's wrapping up a moving process; needless to say he's been pretty tired lately.

It would've slipped his mind all over again if only strange things hadn't started happening in the Allman-house. To begin with they aren't even all that strange but more of a subtle and passing *something* that Gerard doesn't notice until long after it has occurred. It starts out with a feeling that something is out of place and for a while he walks around constantly straightening pictures and shutting doors until it dawns on him that he's doing this because things aren't the way they're supposed to be. It doesn't take long until small items start moving around, especially stuff he immediately needs, such as his car keys. He'll put them on the kitchen counter and find them on the coffee table minutes later. Once he even found them in the fridge, sitting neatly next to the milk, quietly mocking him and his memory.

Like every sane person would in a similar situation, Gerard manages to convince himself that he's just extremely tired and absentminded. But when it starts happening to old book manuscripts, half-finished art pieces, his phone and even his laptop, which he spent one whole weekend looking for only to find it exactly where he left it, he can't really explain what's going on anymore.

For a few strange days the restless disappearance and reappearance of things continues, often right in front of his nose but always in such an inconspicuous way that he doesn't realize it right away. A faint draft also seems to settle in the house. It's hardly noticeable but a door will suddenly slam shut somewhere in the house without any of the windows being open. A room will turn inexplicably cold on even the sunniest days and usually that specific drop in temperature appears to follow him around, forcing him to constantly check the thermostat and put on cardigans. Thanks to this, getting in and out of bed has turned into an ice-cold experience and he dreads it every time. He's even checked himself for a fever but he is nowhere near being sick.

The house is simply chilly, without Gerard being able to explain how.

It's obvious that the strangeness doesn't stop at cold rooms and independent nonliving things. The atmosphere in the house is sometimes unbearably heavy and Gerard finds himself stuck with a dull headache he just can't shake. His temper grows shorter for no apparent reason and this irritable mood extends into his work. He can sit for hours angrily typing out something half-assed only to end up deleting it, and whenever he *does* feel inspired his attention drifts and nothing gets done. Whatever he attempts only transforms into big useless blocks of text and at times it annoys him so much he's on the verge of throwing everything out the window.

His patience is already rubbed paper-thin when that familiar draft rushes through the living room one late night. In the next moment Gerard's laptop shuts down, unintentionally deleting the email he was trying to compose, and he loses his temper altogether.

"Will you fucking *stop*?" he snaps into the empty air, slamming his hand down on the table and knocking his empty coffee cup over in the process.

He glares around at his dead quiet surroundings, his cheeks flushed and his ears hot, but the room remains as unresponsive as ever. He drags his hands across his face and groans into his palms; he must be coming down with something because it can't be normal feeling like this. Gerard gets up with a sigh and turns the lights off before heading upstairs. Maybe it's just the whole process of adjusting to a brand new home and a brand new environment. He's going to assume it's safe to blame it on that.

It's while he's standing in front of the toilet in the upstairs bathroom that his dull headache turns worse, like someone flicked a switch inside his head. He pinches the root of his nose, a little taken aback by the unexpected change. This is so typical, especially when he should be writing like crazy. Whenever he feels like he's got the least bit of control something unwanted like this pops up. Truth is he doesn't really know what to do, headache or not. Patrick has been admirably understanding and patient with him this whole time, which is honestly just Patrick being his usual sweet self, but Gerard wonders for how long he can keep that up before he needs to start pushing deadlines on him. The problem is that there's just something about his new book that doesn't sit right. It doesn't seem like something people would read. He can hardly even envision the idea manifested into an actual *book*, despite the characters and the story arch. It's all there; he

just doesn't know what to do with it. He needs to solve it, one way or another.

Gerard finishes up and moves over to the counter to wash his hands, hoping that a good night's sleep will make things better. Then he throws a glance at himself in the mirror and his heart actually stops for a second. A complete stranger is staring back at him. The hazy figure isn't next to him or behind him but instead imprinted on top of his reflection, like a double exposure photograph. Gerard can barely see his own face shine through the unintelligible shape but he can tell that his eyes are wide and that his jaw has dropped.

He spins around but discovers that he's completely alone. When he turns back to the mirror the figure is gone and the only thing that's left is the reflection of his face, which by now has turned dead pale. His heart is pounding furiously and his brain doesn't seem to be working, but his first instinct is to get the hell out of there. Without giving it another thought Gerard strides right out of the bathroom and doesn't stop until he's made his way downstairs. He continues until he's standing outside shivering in the weak glow from the porch light.

He takes a deep breath, trying to reason with himself. So he just saw what was undeniably a person in his bathroom mirror – literally *inside* the mirror – and it wasn't himself. He tries to scrape together a decent amount of rational explanations but all he ends up doing is wondering what the actual fuck he's supposed to do. Does he break the mirror? Cover it up? Ignore it? Never spare his reflection another glance for the rest of his life? *Can* he even do anything about it? Well, not if it's only in his head. If that's the case it won't matter what he does. He randomly remembers reading something once about dissociative moments, back when he was doing research for one of his books. Apparently it's normal not to recognize yourself in the mirror from time to time, but the article had said nothing about *sharing* your reflection with someone else. He must either be really fucking exhausted or he's simply going crazy. Maybe this is the insanity people have been trying to push onto him all this time.

Whatever he chooses to do, Gerard knows he can't stay out on the porch all night. He resists the urge to light up a cigarette and tentatively makes his way back inside. He lingers by the front door and takes a moment to build up some sense of courage before he trudges back upstairs, making a number out of creating as much noise as possible, simply because that feels safer. It's the opposite of the horror movie-strategy, which usually means sneaking around until someone ends up with their guts ripped out or their head cut off.

He steps inside the empty bathroom and stares at his own pale face in the mirror, waiting. He listens for anything out of the ordinary but his ears are only met with the sound of his hammering heartbeats. For several seconds nothing happens. At last Gerard shakes his head at his behavior, thinking this is simply ridiculous. *He's being ridiculous.* He's got a fucking headache and he needs to sleep, that's all. Gerard grabs a couple of Aspirin from the medicine cabinet and stomps off to the bedroom. He's not going to scare himself into pulling an all-nighter.

Unsurprisingly, sleep doesn't come easy. He restlessly drifts off some time around dawn and even then he's not sure if he's actually sleeping or just watching himself sleep, but it knocks him out somehow. He wakes up way past midday, with a clammy t-shirt clinging to his back and with pillow creases on his cheek. He's groggy and exhausted but his headache is gone, if anything.

Needless to say Gerard is cautious about using the upstairs bathroom and doesn't move until his bladder forces him to go – not to mention that it was time to get the fuck out of bed at least five hours ago. He weighs the possibilities of some supernatural force drowning him in the shower but has enough sense in him to remember that he's being entirely ridiculous again and that life rarely turns out to be a movie, whether it's scary or romantic or adventurous. He gets through showering and dressing without any freak accidents occurring, and by the time he's making his way downstairs he's convinced last night was nothing but a screwed up product of his own mind. That is, until he enters the kitchen and discovers the complete stranger waiting for him.

Gerard stops dead in his tracks, his heart so high in his throat he's certain he might choke on it. One part of his mind practically yells for him to call the police while the other screams that he needs to get the hell out of there; abandon everything and drive the fuck back to the city. It's 'Intruder alert!' versus 'I should have listened to Mikey', and as a result Gerard is rendered completely paralyzed and unable to do anything but stare.

The stranger in front of him is a young man at about twenty years of age. He's dressed in a light beige shirt, one that resembles a piece of uniform used during the Second World War, and it has been tucked into a pair of perfectly creased pants. His dark hair is slicked back with neat precision and his boots are spotless. He looks like a soldier dressed up and ready to ask the prettiest girl if he may have the next dance, and the only thing Gerard can think of is how misplaced he is standing there by the kitchen counter. The only logical explanation to

this would be Halloween; Halloween in the middle of fucking April.

“Good morning – or rather, good afternoon.” The young man greets him with a smile, like there’s nothing unusual about this at all. “I’d make you coffee but I’m not sure how this thing works... I haven’t seen it before.” He reaches out towards the coffeemaker and Gerard is ready to swear that his hand just went straight through it, even though he *looks* as solid as anything. His gesture makes the can wobble slightly but that’s it.

“Who –” Gerard manages, wide-eyed and short of breath.

“Oh, I’m sorry. I’m Franklin Iero, but most of the time they call me Junior. Or just Frankie.”

“What... what are you... how did you...?”

“*I live* here.” The tone in his voice suggests that this is the most obvious thing in the world; he’s regular inventory and that is that. “You’d known that much sooner if it hadn’t taken you so long to just acknowledge me in the first place. I’ve been trying to catch your attention for a while now.”

“*You* live –” Gerard cuts himself off and shakes his head. “No. *I* live here. And – and... God, I don’t even know why I’m fucking talking to you. You are in my head and *not* real. I’m gonna give you a minute and then you’ll go away.”

He strides determinately up to the counter and starts making coffee with trembling hands, deciding not to reason with whatever this hallucination is. This has already reached so far beyond stupid he isn’t even going to try and wrap his mind around it. He’s just going to wake up, eventually, and think no more of it.

“Afraid you’re going bonkers, huh?”

“*Bonkers...*” Gerard repeats the word with a breathless laugh.

“Yeah, as in crazy. Losing your marbles.”

Franklin steps closer to him, radiating a certain kind of freezing cold that makes the hairs on Gerard’s arms stand up. He marvels at the goose bumps on his skin and quietly thinks yes, there’s definitely something crazy about this. That doesn’t make it any less real. He takes a cautious step back and scrutinizes the young man’s small build, struck by sudden recognition in the wake of his numb shock.

“Have you... did you stand in my driveway? On the day I moved in...?”

Franklin gives it a quick thought. “I’m bad with keeping track of days but... I don’t see a lot of people in that driveway anyway so yeah, that was probably me.”

Gerard edges further away from him, moving slowly until the kitchen island separates them. “Why are you dressed like that?”

“I used to be a fighter pilot,” Franklin replies lightly. “You know, in the war? Unfortunately, I got shot down.” He shrugs, like it’s no big deal, eyening Gerard’s doubtful expression with absurd casualness. “In case you don’t believe I’m real, I’m buried at the local cemetery. I’m about eight or nine headstones north of the cedar tree, second row. That should give you proof enough.”

Gerard opens his mouth to say he’s got no business lurking around the cemetery in broad daylight but Franklin has disappeared before he gets to it. The early morning sunlight regains its warmth inside the empty kitchen, mixing itself comfortably with the scent of newly brewed coffee, and Gerard’s mind is in shambles. He sits there by the counter until the untouched cup in his hands starts growing cold against his palms. He wouldn’t call himself easily spooked on a general basis – when he was younger he used to live for all things creepy – but right now he is silently freaking out. His thoughts keep repeating what every strange incident has been trying to plant in his subconscious all along: that he is possibly dealing with a *ghost*. The spirit of a dead person might actually be living in this house together with him. That’s definitely not what he paid for.

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It doesn’t take that much discussing back and forth before he decides to head out to the cemetery. He’s far too curious for his own good and thanks to previous experiences with research it’s not the first time he’s been skulking around places like that. In addition there’s nothing he wants more than to figure out his current mental state, once and for all. He might actually be losing his mind here, or going bonkers as Franklin so casually put it, and he sorely needs some proof that he’s not. Madness alone writes great books but it’s not what he needs right now to spur on his creativity.

One of the nice things about Kellmington is that it holds a lot of places that could just as well have served as movie locations, and the



cemetery is exactly such a place. It's a small square patch of green land located at the top of a sloping hill and surrounded by a massive tangle of carefully tended growth. It looks idyllic by day and abandoned by night, something that typically fits everyone's expectations of what you might find in a small town.

Gerard parks outside the gate and waits, attempting to catch an immediate feel of the atmosphere before he enters the place, though nothing unusual about it strikes him. Every fiber in his body is screaming for a cigarette and he really just wants to give in to his cravings and stay on that side of the picket fence, but at the same time his curiosity is making his skin crawl so much it's getting uncomfortable. At last he sets his eyes on the great cedar tree in the near distance and determinately passes through the heavy gate. He makes a wild guess at where north is and cautiously starts counting headstones, some of them tended to, others forgotten.

He's reached number fourteen when he's beginning to seriously doubt the ghost's instructions, and above all himself. It seems like he must have imagined this after all. He glances helplessly around, a little worried at the fact that he still sees himself as someone relatively calm and rational; it's how crazy serial killers are usually portrayed right before they brutally murder someone.

He is about to head back when he looks up and the first few letters of a familiar name catches his attention. He weaves his way between the rows and crouches in front of a slanting headstone, slowly rubbing his palm over the surface and peeling away several years' worth of moss and dirt. The inscription has partly withered away but he can still make out what it says.

*Franklin Anthony Iero Jr.*

*1921 – 1943*

*Beloved son*

Gerard straightens up and takes half a step back, his heart racing. He's reluctant to believe it – because it is utterly fucking mad, no matter how he chooses to approach the issue – but the damn grave exists. Logic says it's impossible to imagine or dream up something so accurately if he's never heard of it before, which only leaves him with

one thing: there is an actual ghost in his house. A fighter pilot from the Second World War, a young man trapped somewhere in his early twenties and still wearing his uniform. Gerard shudders as another somersault of spring wind comes rushing past the headstones and he shoves his hands deeper into the pockets of his coat. A real fucking *ghost*, no less. What the hell is he even supposed to do about that?

“G’afternoon.”

The unfamiliar voice startles him and he spins around, finding himself face to face with an elderly man. He’s carrying a rake in one hand and a watering can in the other, and the front of his overall is cluttered with smudges of dirt. The groundskeeper. Gerard exhales in relief.

“You the new guy?” the man asks, his question giving away just how few people there are in Kellmington; the word about Gerard’s arrival has most likely made its way around town several times. Besides, a person such as the groundskeeper knows everyone. *Both living and dead*, Gerard thinks in his quiet mind.

“Yeah, I’m the one who bought the Allman-house.”

“Oh, that’s right.” The groundskeeper nods, politely hiding what he already knows. “That’s a nice house, big property. You like it up there?”

“Yeah, it’s perfect. Exactly what I was looking for.” *Minus the fact that my landlord is a ghost*, his thoughts chip in.

“Did you move here because of work?”

“Kinda.” Gerard shrugs. “I work from home, mostly. I’m a writer.”

“Right, right.” The old man lets the matter rest and gestures at Franklin’s grave instead. “The Ieros used to live up there for a while, you know, before the family got scattered and the Allmans took over. You got ties to them?”

“Uh, no... I just heard from... from someone that they used to live there. Their son, Franklin Junior, was a fighter pilot during the Second World War, right? He died in combat?”

The man stares at him for a puzzled moment before he breaks out in laughter, and it’s so loud and hearty it makes Gerard twitch with surprise. “Who died in combat, you said? Junior?” The groundskeeper makes room for another amused chuckle and shakes his head. “I’m

sorry but I think your source's been lying to you. He was drafted but that's about as far as he got."

Gerard frowns. "I'm sorry, I don't follow..."

"Young Junior had a serious heart condition, from what I've heard," he explains. "Yep. He had nothing to do in the Army, let alone the Air Force. As useful as tits on a fish, that one."

Gerard gestures vaguely at the headstone. "But he... he died so young."

"That's not because he fell in the war though."

"No...?"

"Oh no." The older man shakes his head. "Was his heart that got him in the end. He died at home."

That actually makes perfect sense. Franklin haunts the house because he died there; if he had been shot down during the war he wouldn't be connected to his home anymore. Most likely they wouldn't even have found a body to bring back to Kellmington in the first place. But what does that make Franklin? A *lying* ghost? Do ghosts even have a clear grasp on what it means to lie to someone? Gerard always thought 'ghosts' were remains of restless energy, something that latched onto old things or got lost in the confinements of refurbished rooms. If they existed at all they wouldn't be clever enough to construct something concrete about their past and actively relate it to the present, and they certainly wouldn't be capable of manifesting themselves in the clear shape of a human being. Ghosts shouldn't even be aware of the fact that they are dead, let alone be able to think and remember. But then there's something about the mysteries of heaven and earth and everything in between that has never been verified.

"Alright then," the groundskeeper says, pulling him out of his thoughts. "I've got work to do so I better get going. You have a nice day."

Once Gerard has made it back home he lingers doubtfully in the front yard, just staring up at the quiet house with its sunlit windows. He makes a move for the door, hesitates, then turns around and heads for the garage instead. He decides to clean up in there and starts aimlessly restacking cardboard boxes for a little while. That steals a good chunk of his time, although he soon finds out that there's too much to clean up and sort through in one afternoon. Besides, the procrastinator in

him is already nagging, making suggestions about doing this some other day – preferably on a Sunday several weeks from now.

Gerard knows perfectly well that he can't hide away in the garage forever and surrenders with a faint sigh. Finally he ends up back in the kitchen, where he distractedly starts emptying the dishwasher for the sake of having something to do while he waits. By some strange intuition he knows that Franklin is going to show up any minute. He can feel it in the way his skin tingles and itches, as if someone is intently watching his back.

The thought has hardly escaped him when he glances over his shoulder and immediately does a double-take. Franklin is standing next to the fireplace, leaning casually against the old bricks with his hands tucked into his pockets, like he's been standing there all along.

"I take it you went to the cemetery?"

"Yeah... I did." Gerard's voice is loud against the emptiness of the kitchen and Franklin's elusive frame. "I, uh, I met the groundskeeper up there... He told me something funny though."

"Oh?"

"You were never a fighter pilot. You didn't even participate in the war."

The ghost stares at him for a few long seconds until he surrenders with a sigh, a strangely faint and defeated sound. "Well, he's right," he nods slowly. "I don't know what a cockpit looks like from the inside. This uniform isn't even mine."

"So... why did you make that up? A lot of men didn't get drafted back then... It's nothing to be ashamed of or anything."

"I don't know." Franklin hangs his head and shrugs, and it looks like he really *can't* remember, as if he's believed in his own lie for so long it turned into something real. "When I try to show myself to someone they usually don't notice, not unless I scare them or something – everyone notices *that*. But you're different. You see me exactly the way I see myself and I just... I guess I wanted to impress you a little." He looks up at him with a small, sheepish smile. "I had to brag about *something*."

"You don't have to impress me," Gerard mutters. He has no idea what the ghost meant about him being different, but judging by the warmth

spreading across his cheeks he's blushing, like it's a reaction to a compliment – and that fact makes him blush even more. "It's not like you're Captain America or anything."

"Captain America," Franklin repeats fondly and stares into the air. "It's a shame I died before I really got the chance to read about him."

"I heard you died because of... um, because of your heart." Gerard tries choosing his words carefully, not sure whether or not a ghost can become upset or emotional about its own death.

To his surprise Franklin snorts spitefully. He pulls his hands out of his pockets and crosses his arms, something that makes him look oddly real and again Gerard questions his own sanity. "That's my official death, yes."

"Okay...? And what's your... unofficial death?"

The ghost looks thoughtfully at him, eyes turning dull in the sunlight. Before Gerard even finds time to blink he's appeared next to him. He gesticulates at the porcelain coffee set, which is still abandoned on the kitchen counter.

"Take this one," he instructs and singles out the broken cup. "Hold it in your hands."

"...why?"

"I'll show you."

Gerard is rather unwilling to leave his safe sunlit spot but he takes one cautious step forward and reaches for the fragile cup. He stands there cradling the porcelain in his hands and for several seconds nothing happens besides Franklin watching him expectantly. He's beginning to feel a little stupid when suddenly the entire kitchen lurches, as if the ground beneath him shifts. It sends the room spinning, instantly changing shapes and draining the colors from the walls until all that's left is old furniture and wallpaper. It only lasts for a second or two and when it's over Gerard is still in his kitchen – except it's not his kitchen at all.

He looks around at his unfamiliar surroundings, confused, and discovers that Franklin has left him alone. The curtains in front of the small window are dark and heavy, drawn shut to keep the sun out. The sparse light makes the single potted plant on the table throw long contorted shadows towards him and Gerard feels like the same

shadows are consuming the room, turning the corners into black holes of nothing. He's standing by himself in a cold and quiet spotlight there by the counter.

The few kitchen appliances around him are outdated and drenched in a hazy shade of greyish white, oddly mismatched against the yellowing wall, and the counter is clean and empty, save for a brown glass bottle. It's inconspicuous in its small size but nonetheless striking in the way it's labeled with skull and crossbones. It's already been opened, clumsily and hastily, judging by the spilled traces of crystal-like powder.

Gerard is about to take a closer look when he remembers the porcelain cup in his hand. He looks down and notices for the first time that it's filled with hot coffee. It seems so real and fresh and now that he's aware of it he can practically feel his palms burn. The steam drifts upwards, settling on his upper lip and catching in his nose – and before his brain has even registered the concealed smell of bitter almonds, Gerard knows in his gut that the coffee is poisoned.

In the next moment his hands are moving. His stomach curls with intense panic as the cup rises slowly to meet his mouth, and no matter how much he wants to stop himself, to let go of the hot beverage or turn his face away, he just can't. It feels like he's on autopilot, like something has taken over his body and is now forcing him to drink.

Gerard squeezes his eyes shut and takes a sip, hesitantly and carefully, his hands shaking. The second he swallows he can feel an acrid, metallic taste settle on his taste buds. It starts out at the center of his tongue and rapidly spreads to coat his entire mouth. He tries not to gag and keeps drinking, spilling all over his chin and throat as he gulps the liquid down, sharp and sour and burning. When he realizes he can't breathe anymore he starts panicking for real. The room tilts from one side to the other and the cup slips out of his hands. It falls to the floor and shatters into pieces, sending coffee and porcelain everywhere, and in the exact moment he's convinced he is going to die Gerard finds himself pulled back to the present world.

The sepia-toned dullness gradually disappears around him, the dark corners again filled with sunlight, and the vibrant colors of the present replaces the faded memory. Gerard gasps sharply, his scrambled consciousness grasping for the safe reality of his kitchen, his eyes and mouth watering. The porcelain cup is clutched convulsively in his hands, still intact. He leans over the sink and retches loudly, struggling against an instinctive urge to puke his guts out.

He coughs, ready to swear that a weak scent of almonds is still stuck in the root of his nose. “You –you fucking killed yourself...?”

“Yeah, that cyanide really didn’t agree with me.”

Gerard stares at the ghost. He looks so solid standing there next to him; he can see how the fabric in his shirt changes shades whenever he turns around, and he can clearly see the creases in his pants and the holes in his belt. Then Franklin moves just a fraction of an inch and the sunlight catches him, turning him into a passing blur, a transparent shadow that fades in the light instead of blocking it. He is nothing but lingering energy, a mere untouchable *apparition* stuck between two worlds – but at the same time he presents himself as something perfectly *real*.

“I’m sorry I put you through that,” he says, and his vague frame sounds sincerely apologetic. “I just don’t think you’d believe me otherwise. And... I don’t really like to talk about it. It sounds cowardly and even though you seem like a good listener you’d probably be quick to judge me, so... I’d rather show it.”

Gerard sinks down on the nearest chair, shivering from the sweat cooling on his back. He knows he should be pissed for being forced to relive someone’s suicide, but he feels so physically and emotionally drained he doesn’t have the strength to be angry.

“Why’d you do it?” he asks instead, wiping the corner of his mouth with the back of his hand.

Franklin drops his head slightly and steps out of the sunlight, once again turning solid against the backdrop of modern home appliance.

“I was young when I got engaged,” he begins, shoving his hands deeply into his pockets again. “Very young; maybe too young, some would say. Her name is... Her name was Jamia and we’d known each other most of our lives. She was amazing, very loyal and loving... You don’t find girls like that growing on trees. And then she got pregnant,” he adds quietly, talking to his boots. “When I died, Jamia had a bump that was six or seven months old. I don’t know for sure; I forget things. I don’t remember her face anymore, or the sound of her voice, but I remember her favorite songs, what kind of dresses she wore, how she used to keep her hair.” He draws his breath in an unnecessary reflex that almost seems to make him fade altogether. “And I loved her, I did. Just... not like that.”

“Why not?”

"It's... it's the kind of thing people don't talk about." A trace of shame and embarrassment is evident in Franklin's otherworldly features. When he looks up a hint of nostalgia has come to life in his eyes. "You see, I had a... a best friend. His name was Dale and we grew up together. We were always together, even in the first draft at the start of the war. All able-bodied men from eighteen to forty." He pauses and smiles sadly to himself. "He was drafted, of course, but I didn't even make it past the medical examination. Heart murmur, the doc said. It made me unfit for duty."

He sighs quietly and shrugs. "So I had to go home and sit the war out while Dale joined the Air Force. He became first lieutenant, the clever bastard." Franklin says it with pride, his back straightening and his lips pulled into a smile, and Gerard's heart sinks when he picks up on the faded tenderness in his voice.

"I said I'd wait for him. We made plans and promises and they were going to last no matter what people said or thought... but then the war claimed him. He never came home."

"So he fell?"

"Picked right out of the sky like a common bird," Franklin says faintly. "Not even a feather left."

"I – wow, I'm sorry." Gerard ducks his head and tries to catch the ghost's eyes, which seem to have turned hazy, clouded with memories. "I'm sorry this happened to you. I can't even imagine how unfair that is."

Franklin just shrugs again, hitching one shoulder almost indifferently. "I had a lot to live for. I had a sweetheart and a baby on the way. I was getting married and the war couldn't touch me. And when we're lucky to be alive we have to pull ourselves together, right? That's what people do, especially when times are rough. But it felt like the war took everything away. I didn't really want to be here anymore."

"Then why are you?" Gerard asks. "Why are you still here?"

"Come on, don't you think that drowning your sorrows in cyanide sounds like a rash decision? I regretted the whole thing afterwards, right after I swallowed that stuff, but by then I was as good as dead and I knew it." Franklin bites his lip. "I was scared too, about what comes after. They say sinners burn in hell and I didn't want that. If that's where I was headed I'd much rather stay here."



“Do you know what happened to Jamia?”

“Well... She was hurt and unhappy with the memories of the house so she moved out after the baby was born. It was a boy, that much I know, but I don't know what happened after they left. Everyone left, eventually... If I weren't locked to this property I'd check up on them but I guess she's gone now anyway... I suppose that's the punishment for killing yourself though; to stay and forget, knowing you died before your time. Haunt the place 'til you go bonkers,” he adds jokingly, though his smile quickly falters.

Gerard doesn't believe there is a certain kind of punishment for committing suicide. He's about to suggest that maybe Franklin's unhappy case is due to an emotional manifestation, some kind of afterlife glitch, only to realize that the ghost has disappeared on him. He shivers, feeling sad and regretful. It's like the imagined cyanide managed to kill something inside him as well.

He sits still for a little while, just in case Franklin shows up again, but after five minutes or so it's obvious that he won't. Gerard has a quick smoke out on the porch, not gaining much from it besides drifting thoughts. When he walks back inside he hears the soft creak of a door being opened somewhere upstairs and without reconsidering it he heads to check it out. He is just turning the corner on the landing when he almost has a heart attack; Franklin is blocking his way and Gerard is merely inches from walking straight through him.

“Holy shit –!” He slumps against the wall, his breath trapped in his chest.

“What, seen a ghost?”

“Don't fucking *do that*, it's not funny!” Gerard hisses, fighting a mixed feeling of fear and annoyance. “I'd rather not join you in the afterlife, thank you.”

“I'm sorry. I just wanted to show you something.” Franklin pauses, eyening him hopefully. “It's in the attic.”

Gerard glances at the door at the end of the landing, which has swung open. He steps doubtfully in the opposite direction, not liking the sound of this. “I hope you're not trying to tell me that your corpse is secretly hidden up there.”

The ghost just laughs, a strangely hushed sound that is so faint it could just as well have emerged from downstairs or outside. “I like

you, kid,” he replies lightly. “You’re funny.”

Before Gerard gets the chance to respond Franklin is gone. He lingers by the wall, wondering if it’ll offend him should he happen to casually ignore the offer. His mind is making every possible association to just about every horror movie he’s ever seen in his entire life, and according to them the number of attic survivors is quite low. Gerard wrings his hands nervously. Then he takes a deep breath, heads towards the attic door and continues up the narrow, creaky stairs. Best not risk turning a perfectly harmless ghost into a snapping poltergeist; he’s really not very keen on entering another slimy dimension via his wardrobe.

The empty attic is dark and dusty, with compact air that’s near impossible to breathe in. The sunlight seeps in through the single circular window, creating faint traces along the cracked wooden floor and highlighting the spider webs decorating the joists in the slanting roof. This is the first time Gerard has been up here since he moved in. It was meant to serve as the usual place for storage but most of the leftover boxes from the relocation have been stacked up in the garage instead, mentally (and lazily) labeled ‘later’.

“Alright, I’m here.” He looks nervously around, trying to spot Franklin’s uniform and hoping he won’t jump out of the shadows. “What d’you wanna show me?”

“Right this way.”

Franklin’s voice drifts softly towards him from somewhere beneath the window and Gerard makes his way over there, crouching awkwardly against the low roof. He splutters at the spider web sticking to his face and coughs at the whirling dust, before the ghost appears next to him, a cold draft in the dim light.

“That wall,” he says simply and points into the nondescript shadows. “There’s a loose board there somewhere. You should be able to push it to the side or pull it off completely, I don’t remember exactly.”

“...and what will I find there?” Gerard automatically takes a step back and swears under his breath when the back of his head bumps into one of the low joists.

“Just look,” Franklin insists. “It’s nothing dangerous, I promise.”

Gerard gives a resigned sigh, knowing that his curiosity is probably going to get him killed one day, and reluctantly goes to check it out.

He squints through the darkness, halfheartedly pushing at the old wall and undeniably battling the feeling of having gone completely nuts – until one of the boards complains and gives way underneath his palms. He pushes at it again, his hands leaving prints in the dust, and it doesn't take long before he's managed to move it out of the way.

"There should be a letter in there," Franklin says before Gerard finds time to ask.

He gets down on his knees and gives the hollow space a hesitant feel, praying that the moisture coating his fingers is due to mold and not rat piss. After a few fumbling moments his hand comes across something that feels different, something dry and smooth, and he instinctively snatches his hand back. He waits until he's certain nothing with legs or teeth is going to come crawling out at him and reaches in there again, eventually pulling out an old envelope. It's crispy, unaddressed and stained yellow but nonetheless in good condition, much thanks to the attic's dark humidity.

"That's it," Franklin whispers, his voice awed, almost frightened. "Read it."

Gerard carefully opens the letter and pulls out a piece of neatly folded paper. He holds it up into the light of the bleeding afternoon sun, his fingers creating spidery silhouettes against the fragile stationary. It's dated November 1943 and the writing is slanted and trembling, suffering from several mistakes and smudged ink blots.

*Mother. Father.  
My darling Jamia.*

*When you read this I will be gone for good. I had hoped, maybe even dreamt, that if I was to die young it would be as a soldier and not like this, by my own actions. You know that I wanted to be in the war, like everyone else. I wanted to fight too, as stupid as it must sound. I bet soldiers coming home would tell me otherwise, that I'm lucky to have escaped those horrors, and I know several mothers envied our family for being able to keep their son safe. God bless this heart murmur, right? At least I wouldn't have to shoot myself in the foot just so they'd send me home again. Everyone knows Franklin Junior wouldn't have lasted a second out there in the crossfire, fighting for his country.*

*Well, truth is I wanted to be there, except I didn't want to fight for my country. I didn't even want to fight for my own life. I don't care. I wanted*

*to fight with someone else because I believe we were meant to, just like we were meant to be together. By now you must have guessed what this is really all about. I don't think it's a secret anymore as much as it's ignored with silence. It was only a matter of time before people would start talking and we'd have a real problem on our hands. Some are quick to condemn around here. Maybe you'd even be forced to shun me if the rumors really caught wind.*

*But that so-called problem is gone now. Dale is never coming home and I should carry on, for the sake of his memory and for the sake of my family and unborn child – but I can't. I know it's selfish and cowardly. I know that suicide doesn't happen to good families, and I guess suicide for a reason like mine doesn't happen either. This is wrong. But I miss him. I love him. And I don't understand how I can move on with my life now. I just can't. It feels like I've lost everything.*

*You can burn or hide this letter, keep it a secret, and use my heart as an explanation for my actions. I know you will and I understand that. This is a small town and it's better to avoid the shame than having to admit to it. Dying because of your heart is not as honorable as fallen in combat but it's better than this. It's understandable for everyone. It will be easier for you. My heart is empty now anyway. I'd rather die and be gone than die halfway, on the inside. I wouldn't be able to go on like that.*

*I apologize for the uniform. I know I'm not a soldier, I know I'll never be one and that there's no use pretending, but this is a spare that I borrowed from Dale's belongings. He hasn't even worn it. I'm not wearing it out of patriotism and I mean no disrespect to his memory, but it was the closest I could get to him. Maybe it'll even be easier for him to find me or see me, if I dress like this. Sounds like I've lost my mind, and I guess I have, but I hope that's what I'll find on the other side of this life – a lost soldier waiting for me.*

*Mother, father – please don't blame yourselves.*

*Jamia – I'll love you forever. But you deserve so much better.*

*“Yours truly, Franklin...”* Gerard reads the signature with a whisper and lets his arm drop.

The echo of Franklin's last words fades out of his mind and the attic turns remarkably quiet and cold. He can't even hear the birds outside anymore and it's like he's caught in a vacuum where neither time nor place exists. The ghost's papery voice snaps him out of it.

“I think there’s more.”

Gerard looks into the envelope and discovers that it does contain another piece of paper. He picks it out, revealing it to be an old photograph, small enough to fit in his palm. The slightly blurred imprint has turned a dull brownish yellow, stained at the edges by old ink and fingerprints, but the motive hasn’t faded. It clearly depicts an even younger Franklin, maybe sixteen or seventeen years old, smiling happily with his arm around another young handsome man. He’s of a taller, slightly more athletic build, but he looks equally happy and carefree.

*Dale & Frankie, Summer 1938*, says the handwritten text on the back.

“They think he was shot down somewhere over France,” Franklin says and gestures at the photograph. “But he was never found.” He steps out of the shadows and into the sun, his lithe frame nearly absorbed by the light, and he gives Gerard a curious smile. “Sometimes you remind me of him.”

He’s gone with the blink of an eye, leaving Gerard alone with an old suicide letter in his hands and his skin tight with goose bumps.

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Gerard spends ages trying to figure out where to keep Franklin’s letter. Truth is he feels a bit uneasy knowing this new information. It’s like he’s sticking his nose into something that’s none of his business. It’s one of those things he’s better off not knowing and right now it feels like he’s unwillingly trying to bring back something that could just as well have stayed hidden. He considers putting the letter back where he found it, just leave it up there in the attic and forget about its existence, but he figures that would be a shame. He’s got a little piece of forgotten history in his possession – it’s personal and tragic, yes, but it’s history nonetheless. Not to mention it is tangible proof of his perfectly (well, almost perfectly) intact sanity. In the end he tucks the envelope away in his nightstand and leaves it at that.

It seems inevitable but the Allman-house soon becomes unfamiliar to him, like a place he doesn’t want to stay in for too long at a time. Maybe the paranoia is just a constructed psychological factor but the ever-present knowledge of possibly being watched interferes with everything he does; undressing, using the bathroom, falling asleep. He’s not alone anymore, whether he likes it or not, and it’s both annoying and uncomfortable. It’s *his* fucking house and still he can’t

control or kick this particular guest out. Instead he's the one who feels compelled to leave all the time, which is exactly what he does during the next couple of weeks.

Most of the time Gerard packs his laptop and travels to the town library, where it's easier to hide away and be left alone. Sometimes he settles for a meal at the small diner, which is a bit more awkward. Eating alone is much easier in the city, where there's always a crowd to blend with and remain anonymous in. But this is Kellmington; people have known each other for years here. The new guy, especially one that's from the city, quickly stands out and turns into a mysterious rarity that everyone is curious about. Not that the locals haven't been nice to him, by all means, but Gerard is pretty sure they've managed to dig up some old news about his rehab days and are eagerly discussing these news behind his back. It's like high school all over again.

Gerard rests his chin in his hand and stares out the window of the diner, absently watching the quiet street. He hasn't slept properly in a while and he can feel the consequences of that every time he stops moving. At one point he considered traveling to the neighboring town an hour away, just to check in at their motel for the weekend, but he ended up deciding against it. He can't allow himself to surrender and become a stranger in his own fucking home.

"How was the pie?"

Gerard looks up at the sound of the cheerful voice and finds Brendon smiling at him. Brendon works there as a waiter and occasional daily manager, and since his parents are the owners of the place he's most likely going to take over one day. Gerard has gotten to know him a bit better lately and he really likes the guy. So far he appears to be the only person who isn't interested in his past mistakes, even though working in a place like this must have served him a fair share of the gossip.

"Still the best apple pie I've ever had," Gerard assures him and gestures at his empty plate.

Brendon beams proudly and pours him another cup of coffee. "So did anyone show you around Kellmington yet?"

"Around?" Gerard repeats incredulously. "How much more is there?"

"Oh, there's a lot more if you look properly into it! I'd be happy to be your guide if you want."

The last remains of spring are slowly covered by early summer and Gerard finds himself hanging out with Brendon a lot during that time. He's lived in Kellmington all his life and he really does know a lot of cool places, most of them unfinished renovation projects and closed-off properties at the outskirts of town. Breaking in and poking around these abandoned sites is the most fun Gerard has had in a while. He might actually be able to draw some ideas and inspiration from these little excursions.

"I bet they're all haunted," Brendon claims as they're walking back from a tour inside the closed glass factory. "That would be typical of Kellmington anyway. It's not like you ever hear about ghosts in the city."

Gerard doesn't doubt it; it's most definitely true in his case. To be fair he is getting a little used to the thought of having Franklin around, sometimes to the extent that he even forgets about him altogether. Then again he hasn't made much of an appearance lately. Gerard has no idea where the ghost actually is or what he does when he's not busy haunting, but the Allman-house feels lighter and more habitable again. He ends up inviting Brendon over once in a while instead of always having to go elsewhere.

"Now *this* house must be haunted," Brendon says one late night. He looks around the kitchen and grins. "You sure you haven't noticed anything out of the ordinary up here?"

"Can't say I have," Gerard lies. "Why? You feel something?"

Brendon hesitates. It looks like he's actually going to confess to having seen a young man wandering through the house, dressed in a Second World War uniform, but instead he just steps closer. "Well, maybe not exactly *that*..." he says meaningfully, his gaze flicking down to Gerard's lips. "But... I think I've felt something else."

He's standing so close Gerard could have counted every single curved hair of his eyelashes if he wanted to. It occurs to him that they're no more than a kiss away from being a dating couple and he's slightly caught off guard by that fact. He truly appreciates Brendon's company a lot, he doesn't mind hanging out with him at all – but he had no idea he felt *that* way about him. In hindsight, maybe he should have read the signs.

Gerard's mind races through a pointless, repetitive debate of *kiss or*

not, kiss or not and he can feel his body leaning forward, somewhat reluctantly, his eyelids fluttering shut and then –

“Oh my God!”

Startled, he opens his eyes just in time to see Brendon leap away from him. He scrambles against the kitchen counter and stares, terrified, at a non-descript spot somewhere behind Gerard’s back.

“What –?” He reaches out and carefully rests a hand on his shoulder. “What is it?”

Brendon points shakily into the darkness. “I – there was – someone was standing there –!”

Gerard turns around and tries to map out the bluish shadows of the living room, but even though he can’t see a single thing he’s got a pretty good idea of what spooked him. He stabs a quick, threatening glare into the darkness before reaching out to pat Brendon’s back.

“I... I’m sure you just imagined it. It’s getting pretty late and –”

Brendon interrupts him with a shake of his head. “No, I – I’m positive I saw someone. It almost seemed like – I mean, I saw a face that was like – it wasn’t even human.” He looks at him, wide-eyed and breathless. “Holy shit, this house really *is* haunted. You... maybe you’ve got an actual ghost here. Oh man, I fucking *knew* it. I *knew* something was up.”

“I haven’t got a –”

“I know exactly how to get this house clean.”

“Uh... Clean –?” Gerard takes a step back, eyening him suspiciously. “I don’t understand –”

Brendon nods and makes his way out of the kitchen, hurrying past the living room in a weird skip-run as though afraid some monster is going to leap out of the shadows and drag him into the underworld. “I know someone who can fix this for you,” he says, his voice dropping into a hushed whisper. “A clairvoyant.”

Gerard just stares, not sure if he even heard him correctly. “A clairvoyant...?”

“A clairvoyant, yeah,” Brendon repeats and fumbles for the doorknob,



apparently eager to get the hell out of there. “I mean, you can’t have that – that *thing* in your house. That was fucking scary.” He lingers out on the front porch, playing nervously with the hem of his t-shirt. “Hey, uh, maybe you wanna stay at my place in the meantime? Until it’s safe to live here again?”

Gerard is unable to hold back a laugh at that, convinced this must be nothing but an elaborate joke and a clever move, but Brendon only wrings his hands nervously. He’s actually being serious and Gerard is almost a little shocked at how quickly this situation turned ridiculous. For a moment he really wants to tell him about Franklin and how harmless the ghost is, just to keep him from blowing this out of proportions, but he figures it would probably freak him out even more. At this point Brendon looks unstable enough to set the house on fire.

“Listen,” Gerard begins, deciding to reason with him instead. “I’ve lived here for almost three months now and nothing horrible has happened to me. This place isn’t dangerous in the slightest.”

“Are – are you sure?”

“I’m one hundred percent sure. I really appreciate the concern but I’m totally safe here, I promise. Don’t get worked up.”

“Well, alright...” Brendon looks reluctant to believe him but reaches out to give his arm an encouraging squeeze. “That’s very brave of you. Just be careful in the meantime, okay?”

As soon as he’s closed the door behind him Gerard turns to face the empty hall, glaring at the shadows. “You hear that, Franklin? The Ghostbusters are on your ass now. Thanks a lot.”

“I’m not that easy getting rid of.” Franklin appears next to him, wearing an expression that’s undeniably smug. “But they’re welcome to try, of course.”

“You’re a dick. I bring guests over and you scare them half to death.”

“Well, I told you people don’t see me unless I scare them. I had to make it special for this one.” The ghost shrugs indifferently. “No one’s got their eyes open anyway, at least not the way you do.”

Gerard huffs and makes his way back to the kitchen. “What did Brendon see exactly?”

“Oh, nothing *too* scary.”

Gerard doesn't even get to argue on it before Franklin has disappeared. He looks around, confused, and does a double-take when he discovers the darkened silhouette lurking by the living room door. It *is* Franklin but at the same time he's nothing like his usual self. The ghost has turned into something unfamiliar, a contorted shape that can hardly be recognized as human, just like Brendon claimed. Gerard is unable to look away, especially from the creature's eyes; they have retreated, sunken into the hollow cavities of their sockets, and all that's left in them is a cold subtle gleam. The ghost just stands there staring at him, completely still, and Gerard can feel the hairs on his arms and at the back of his neck stand up. If that's what Brendon saw it's perfectly understandable why he was in such a rush to leave.

“God, you're awful,” Gerard mutters irritably and starts filling up the dishwasher. “I get that you wanna make a statement because you used to live here and everything, but that's no excuse for making *me* look like a complete idiot. That shit you just pulled was fucking uncalled for.”

“I didn't do that for personal gain,” Franklin says casually, having returned to his familiar form. “If anyone's supposed to make a statement here it's you.”

Gerard turns around, a dirty plate in his hand. “What the hell's that supposed to mean?”

“I think you're caught up in something you don't want. What almost happened there between you and that other guy... Now that made you uncomfortable, I could tell.”

“You can't *tell* anything, you're a ghost! You're nothing but stubborn energy! And if you're talking about Brendon I won't have any of it. He's actually really nice, unlike certain others.”

Franklin falls silent for a little while, hazel eyes studying him closely. “You a pushover, kid?”

“No,” Gerard retorts, glaring. “And stop calling me ‘kid’, for fuck's sake. I'm older than you.”

The ghost just laughs and shakes his head. “With all due respect but you're really not.”

“Whatever.” Gerard slams the door to the dishwasher shut. “Can't you

be somewhere else for a while? Don't you have a special connection to your grave or something? I hear it's nice out on the cemetery at this time of night, especially for someone like you."

"Look, I know your private life is none of my business. And you can do whatever you want, I just don't want you to end up like me, that's all."

Gerard snorts. "What – choking in a pool of cyanide?"

He's more than angry enough to mean it but once the words are out of his mouth he realizes just how spiteful they are. This is only confirmed by the way Franklin's face falls, a trace of hurt and disappointment evident in his features. Gerard looks away, quickly pressing his lips together and busying himself with the timer on the dishwasher.

"I meant to say that I don't want you to be unhappy," the ghost corrects him quietly. "Think about it, at least."

Gerard opens his mouth to tell him that he's perfectly capable of taking care of himself but discovers that Franklin has vanished into thin air again. "Yeah, go ahead," he snaps, talking to the empty room. "Go hide as soon as the discussion gets interesting, why fucking don't you?"

He leans against the counter with a sigh and runs a hand through his hair, bad conscience and embarrassment like a heavy lump in his chest.

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It turns out that the clairvoyant Brendon knows is some local hippie-dude named Ray. Gerard can't be sure that he actually *is* a hippie, but his curly mop of hair and the guitar case propped up in the backseat of his old van has him jumping to conclusions.

Ray's mission starts with a quick tour of the house, just to get an idea before he 'balances everything', as he puts it. With Gerard and Brendon tagging along, he wanders from room to room, not really saying much besides the occasional 'hm' and 'okay'. Gerard is honestly a little worried about Franklin. He knows the ghost isn't visible to most people but he fears that Ray is going to spot him anyway and immediately banish him on the spot. The guy's skills might turn out to be perfectly legit and even though the ghost is annoying and inconvenient, Gerard feels bad about bringing this walking ghost-

repellent into his house. For some reason this strategy seems a bit too harsh and unexpected to be considered right. It's like they're trying to trick Franklin into leaving.

"So, um, how does this balancing happen?" he asks, once the three of them have finally gathered in the kitchen.

To Gerard, 'balancing' sounds a lot like physically getting rid of stuff. He imagines Ray walking through the house and smashing every old-looking glass ornament he can find while muttering some obscure incantation. After all, Franklin is a prime example of how ghosts have a tendency to hang on to tangible things, such as old porcelain cups and not to mention the entire Allman-house.

"Oh, it's no big deal, really," Ray shrugs. "We hold hands and lead them into the light. Nothing dramatic or satanic or anything."

"I promise he's really good at this," Brendon chips in. "He's even cleaned out churches."

"Balanced," Ray corrects him. "But yeah, ninety percent of the time this goes smoothly."

"And the remaining ten percent...?"

He grins and points a finger at his own temple. "The ghost didn't even exist in the first place; just people believing in them too much." He pulls a couple of scented candles out of his backpack and puts them on the kitchen table, motioning for them to take a seat. "So we're gonna balance the entire house, like I said. I'd like both of you to concentrate on happy thoughts, just so we've got a nice circle of love and light going. This is gonna attract the spirit and lead it into the afterlife."

"And... that's it?" Gerard asks doubtfully, raising an eyebrow at him.

"Yep, that's it." Ray nods and lights the candles. "When I did my round earlier I addressed the spirits living here and in most cases, such as this one, they just want someone to see them and acknowledge their existence. That way it'll be easier for them to let go, you know?"

Gerard is anything *but* convinced. He wonders why Ray speaks of his one ghost in plural, as if the place is actually swarming with a double-digit number of dead souls. His feeling of skepticism only doubles into surprise when he becomes aware of Franklin. The ghost has joined them, out of the blue, and is standing right next to Ray. The sun

pierces through his chest and his combed back hair stays strangely dull, refusing to reflect the light, but he's sporting an expression that seems to be a mix of genuine amusement and curiosity. He catches Gerard's eye and shakes his head with a smile.

"This is bullshit," he says, his voice so loud and clear that Gerard twitches with surprise.

A second goes by where he just holds his breath and waits for Ray to finally catch up on everything, but he appears to be entirely oblivious to the fact that a ghost is practically breathing into his ear.

"Okay, so let's join hands," he suggests, further proving how much of a clairvoyant he *really* is.

*I'm wasting time and money on a fucking scam*, Gerard thinks irritably as he grabs the guy's hand.

"Now – close your eyes and focus on the light in yourselves," he instructs, his eyelids falling shut. "Look into your hearts and bring your love into this circle."

Gerard peers through one eye at Brendon, who seems to have fallen into deep concentration, his lips pursed and his eyebrows furrowed.

"Alright, here they come," Ray continues. "Step into the light, guys, it's not dangerous."

"Who the hell is he talking to?" Franklin jabs his thumb at the clairvoyant's curly head and smiles incredulously. "The only ghost here is me and I've had several decades to check." He chuckles, a slight derisive tone to his voice. "It's an honorable attempt but this mission was FUBAR before it even started."

"We pray that you'll cross over and find peace at last," Ray chants, still embarrassingly clueless.

"Yeah – and hallelujah to you too," Franklin adds, and Gerard can't help but snort a laugh.

Ray's eyes snap open in an instant. "Dude – this place is jam-packed with spirits," he says seriously, his voice lowered. "I do recommend we get rid of the unwanted energy or this is gonna pile up into something unpleasant. So, you know, I'd appreciate it if you could focus for a few more seconds?"

“Oh. Yeah, of course.” Gerard nods eagerly, trying his best to keep a straight face. “I’m so sorry. Carry on.”

Ray takes a steadying breath and closes his eyes again. “They’re all letting go now,” he says reverently. “Don’t be surprised if you feel a strange sense of warmth settling deep within your chests. That’s a common thing, totally harmless.”

“Yeah... I can feel it,” Brendon whispers, his voice trembling slightly. “That’s amazing,” he adds, while Gerard can’t feel a single thing besides an itch on his nose.

“Oh boy!” Franklin wails. “I feel it too! I feel it!”

Gerard takes his chance on yet another one-eyed squint and watches him stumble his way into the middle of the kitchen, clutching his chest dramatically and pulling a face of badly faked pain.

“They’ve noticed the light now... They’re entering it... Preparing to close the gate,” Ray declares. “Just so we make sure they won’t return.”

“The light!” Franklin shouts in the background, skipping around the room with a couple of graceful pirouettes. “I can hardly stand it! It’s too beautiful!”

Gerard bites hard down on his lip, trying his damndest not to break into laughter.

“And... there.” Ray opens his eyes again, a satisfactory expression upon his face. “The spirits have passed over. It’s done.”

“I’m passing over!” Franklin exclaims, waving his hands desperately. “Watch me go!”

He sticks his tongue out at them, falls backwards and disappears right through the wall. He makes sure to thoroughly rattle the cups and plates in the cupboards and then tramples his way through the second floor, finally ending the séance by slamming the attic door shut.

The three of them are left in stunned surprise. Brendon is pale and wide-eyed, his hand still clutching Gerard’s, and even Ray looks entirely caught off guard. Gerard is pretty sure this is the first time in his career that his so-called balancing gave such telltale results. He feels a little bad about falsely validating Ray’s nonexistent talent as a clairvoyant; from now on he’s probably going to expect dramatic

séances like this to happen every time. Then again, a confidence boost is a confidence boost.

“Well,” Gerard says at last, breaking the silence. “That was, um, effective. I’m impressed.”

After Ray has left Brendon turns to him with an eager smile on his face, and Gerard’s stomach drops when he’s reminded of last week’s almost-kiss all over again.

“So – how about we celebrate this?”

“Celebrate...?”

“Yeah!” He nods enthusiastically. “The Allman-house is finally normal again! Don’t you think that’s worth celebrating? I was thinking that maybe we could –”

“Bren, listen –” Gerard puts a hand on his arm, awkwardly silencing him in the middle of his suggestion and he feels like a complete ass for not having done this sooner. “I’m really sorry but I don’t think this is... I don’t think this whole thing between you and me is working out.”

“Um...” Brendon’s face falls. “Why...? I didn’t do or say anything –?”

“No!” Gerard quickly shakes his head and gives his shoulder a reassuring squeeze. “You didn’t do anything wrong at all. You’re awesome, really, I love hanging out with you, but...” He shrugs apologetically. “I think you’re looking for something more and I’m just not interested in that.”

“Oh...” The tone in Brendon’s voice changes from confused disappointment to unsure surprise. “Well, I – I thought that you were actually...”

“I know you did and I *am*, just... not in our case. I’m sorry. ” Gerard can’t help but cringe at his own poor judgment. “I should have said something earlier.”

“Well... okay. I mean, I didn’t notice anything wrong but if that’s how you really feel...”

“I’d like us to be friends though,” he adds stupidly, and he has honestly never felt this lame in his entire life. “I just don’t want... you know, anything more than that. It would be unfair on the both of us if

we... go there. I'm so sorry."

Brendon looks at him, his expression torn. Then he gives him a small, resigned smile and nods. "I understand, really. If you feel that way then... I guess there's not much you can do to change. No hard feelings, and I mean that. I do hope you'll keep visiting the diner though, even if it's just for the pie."

As Gerard finds himself pulled into a tight hug he looks over Brendon's shoulder and spots Franklin. He's sitting on the kitchen counter, smiling widely and giving him the thumbs-up.

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That same night Gerard has the strangest dream. To begin with he's convinced he's awake and that he's actually standing in the hallway staring into his own bedroom, but the room doesn't look like his at all. He's in the Allman-house but it's different. It's dark and cramped, as though it has shrunk in on itself.

He can feel his eyes move underneath his eyelids, the rational part of his brain bewildered and confused as he tries to keep up with his private screenplay. While the image as a whole becomes blurry at the edges, the bed in the middle of the room only turns clearer. It's like the focus on some invisible camera is adjusted and Gerard's vision just tags along, his mind living its own life.

There are two people in that bed, definitely not sleeping, and Gerard instinctively knows he's got no business being here. He wants to back out of the room, or at least cover his eyes, but he can't seem to function properly. He can't walk away and he can't close his eyes, no matter how hard he tries. He's forced to stand there, quietly invisible, and watch as the sheets slip away and fall to the floor, exposing damp naked skin and tightly intertwined fingers. Soft sighs fade into the constructed dream world, disappearing into the shadowy corners of nothing, and it comes as no surprise that he's watching Franklin and Dale.

It's while Gerard frantically fights sleep that the scene suddenly shifts right in front of him. His perspective changes and somehow he's taken Dale's place. That is positively *his* body pressed against Franklin's and *his* hand running through his hair. He's smiling down at him, their faces only separated by a few inches, and he can feel his own lips shape themselves around muted words he can't even hear.

Something at the very back of Gerard's trapped consciousness starts



yelling at him, urging him to wake up from the dream. He wants to grip the sheets and pull himself out of everything but his body won't respond properly. Instead he finds himself leaning down for a kiss. Gerard can feel their lips connect, the sweet softness of Franklin's mouth and the warmth of his breath all too real. They're just as real as the palms caressing his skin, as real as Franklin's fingertips trailing up his spine and getting tangled in his hair. It leaves sensations throughout Gerard's body that only branches further, creating small sparks that coil themselves around every tensing and relaxing muscle.

Gerard trashes in another attempt at waking up, but in that moment Franklin wraps his legs around his waist, somehow holding him back. His own dream is practically forcing him to stay under the light sedation of sleep. Somewhere in his foggy consciousness he's starting to freak out and the faint panic only increases when he feels himself push slowly into the man beneath him. He's so unbearably tight, the sweat on his chest slick against Gerard's skin, and even though his real self is struggling to wake up, his dream self is grinding his hips and thrusting into someone who strictly doesn't exist anymore. It's all kinds of wrong but it feels so fucking good that he can't help but moan loudly, both in dream and reality.

Franklin's lips appear next to his ear, his cheek damp and his breath burning. "I knew you'd come back to me," he whispers – and that's when Gerard finally wakes up.

His body is tugged up from the mattress as if someone just sent an electric current through him. He gasps sharply, unable to recognize the room for a good couple of seconds, and it's like his heart is going to explode right out of his chest. Then he realizes he's got his hand pried well into his boxers and that his fingers are wrapped firmly around himself. He's aching hard and he can't fucking help it. Gerard doesn't really think, he just scrambles out of bed and rushes across the hall and into the bathroom, slamming the lights on before he gives the roll of toilet paper a twirl. He kneels next to the heap of tissue that's rapidly accumulating on the floor and with a few quick strokes he jerks himself off, unsuccessfully trying to think about something else than the dream he just woke up from. He comes way too soon and way too hard, with a sharp and almost despaired whimper, staining both his hand and the pile of toilet paper.

He remains on his knees for a while after the last traces of his orgasm has left him, just staring breathlessly at the wasted tissue in front of him. His hair clings to his forehead, his t-shirt soaked and sticky against his back, and a shudder of disgust and shame shoots through

him. He didn't just dream this; he was part of someone's memory.

By the time he finally gets up from the floor Gerard is furious. He throws the heap of paper into the bin, brusquely washes his hands and marches back to the bedroom. There he paces around restlessly, working up his anger until it feels like it's not directed at himself anymore. He rests his hands on his hips, scowls into the nondescript darkness and waits, knowing it's only a matter of seconds until Franklin shows up. The thought has hardly escaped his mind before the ghost has materialized in front of him, suddenly and soundlessly.

"You're angry."

His voice is faint, nothing but a whisper of regret that Gerard can barely even hear, but right now he doesn't care how frail or how regretful he is. If he could wrap his hands around Franklin's dead fucking neck and kill him all over again, he would.

"Damn right I'm angry!" he snaps, spit flying. "What the hell was that?!"

"I – I'm sorry."

"This is fucked up. This whole thing is seriously so fucked up and you're not even aware of that, are you? I don't think you're even aware of the fact that *you're dead!*" Gerard shouts the last couple of words, making Franklin flinch. "You're a *ghost* and you keep terrorizing me! You are literally messing with my fucking head!"

Franklin stares at him, his appearance growing hazier, more translucent. "Gerard, I'm sorry," he repeats, his whisper barely audible. "I – I wish I hadn't done that, I only wanted –"

"And I wish you'd just disappear!"

"But –"

Gerard doesn't have any patience or rational thought left. He grabs the nearest item, which happens to be a pillow, and chucks it angrily across the room. Franklin has already vanished by the time the pillow hits the wall.

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The next morning is heavy with uneasy restlessness and Gerard is emotionally drained. He distractedly makes breakfast and eats it in

uncomfortable silence, with nothing to accompany him but the ticking of the clock. Afterwards he paces aimlessly around the house for a while, turning the TV on and then off again, annoyed by the never-ending loop of daytime drama and reality shows. He steps out on the patio to have a cigarette and another cup of coffee, and he stays there until a light drizzle of rain chases him back inside. In the end he picks up a sketchbook and doodles a couple of random figures while waiting for the sky to clear up again.

There's no denying it; Gerard feels bad about what he said last night – to the extent it's possible to feel sorry for a ghost. Franklin probably doesn't always know how to distinguish between the borders of reality and other people's limits, not after all this time. He looks thoughtfully down at the superhero he's drawing, realizing that the man's outfit is gradually turning into a soldier's uniform. He might actually have done a better job than Ray at banishing Franklin from his home and he really hopes that's not the case. He wouldn't want it to end like this for him, even though the ghost has long since overstayed his time on earth. It's not like he directly did him any harm.

The accusing silence of the house soon becomes too obvious and Gerard decides to pay the cemetery another visit. He stops at the local flower shop on his way and buys a pot of bright red marigolds, thinking the least he can do is to tend to Franklin's grave.

By the time he pulls up outside the cemetery gates it has stopped raining. He parks next to an old, unwashed Toyota and strolls down the narrow path between the headstones, enjoying how the faint morning breeze stirs the leaves of the cedar tree and lightly showers him with misty drops of rain. It's shaping up to be a perfect day.

The cemetery seems to be deserted as usual and he has almost reached Franklin's grave when he stops dead in his tracks. Someone is already there, an unknown young man by the looks of it. He has planted a couple of flowers on the grave and an inexplicable surge of recognition shoots through Gerard's chest when he finally catches a glimpse of his face.

*But that's impossible*, he thinks, his heart caught in his throat. *It can't be...*

"Franklin...?"

The young man turns around at the sound of his voice and Gerard nearly drops his flowers in sheer surprise. The man staring back at

him is Franklin Iero. From the arch of his eyebrows to the curve of his lips and the shape of his jawline, this is positively Franklin Iero and he's fucking standing right next to his own grave, alive and well. A moment of stunned disbelief passes before it dawns on Gerard that the man is actually dressed in modern clothes. A closer look confirms that he's actually quite different from the soldier up at the Allman-house. His dark hair is a bit long, softly curling at his neck and against his jaw, and he has to constantly reach up to brush it out of his eyes. Gerard can even make out tattooed letters on his knuckles, as well as the tail of what looks like a scorpion etched into the side of his neck. This isn't Franklin – but at the same time it is.

The stranger looks at him with mild confusion, his mouth pulled up in a close-lipped smile, and once again the similarity is so striking Gerard automatically takes half a step back.

“Do I know you?”

Gerard realizes he's just standing there with his mouth dropped open and a pot of fucking marigolds in his hands. “Um, not... not really,” he manages. “I just, uh, I bought the Allman-house a couple of months back and I –”

“Oh, so *you're* the one who bought it? I knew it was up for sale but I had no idea who the buyer was.” He extends his tattooed hand towards him and smiles widely, introducing himself as Frank Iero. “I don't know if anyone told you but my grandfather, Franklin, used to live up there way before the Allmans took over everything.”

Oh, Gerard knows alright. He clumsily shifts the potted plant from his right hand to his left and grabs Frank's cold fingers, all the while staring like a fool as he introduces himself. This is just as obvious as it is amazing; he's actually standing face to face with Franklin's grandson. By a series of impossible coincidences the ghost back at his house has somehow been brought back to life. And he's *here*, in Kellmington. The odds are next to none.

“I – yeah, I heard about the Ieros.” Gerard searches through his scrambled mind, trying to regain his composure before the guy deems him completely retarded. “So, um, you and your grandfather got the name in common, huh?”

“Yeah, we're basically three generations of Franklins, maybe even more, I don't know. It's kinda lame. Please call me Frank though,” he adds. “I can't fuckin' deal with my full name.”

Gerard exhales quietly, unable to help it. “You look just like him. That’s why I got a little – you know.”

Frank just laughs and Gerard can feel his heart skip a beat at that. “So I’ve heard. Never met the man myself but yeah, apparently I’m his clone or something.” He pauses and throws him a curious glance, his head tilted. “How did you know that, by the way? That I look like old Iero? You’re way too young to have known him, that’s for sure.”

“Oh, um –” Gerard stutters, his brain not processing fast enough to realize his slip until it’s too late. He gives himself a mental slap across the cheek and grabs onto the first lie he can think of. “I found an old photograph in the attic. I was cleaning and stumbled across it.”

“Whoa, did you really?” Frank stares at him, his expression genuinely surprised. “You wouldn’t happen to have it on you?”

Gerard is actually on the verge of telling him to come up to the Allman-house and collect it himself, but he manages to keep his mouth shut. He doesn’t want to be too straightforward with someone he just met five minutes ago. “No, I’m afraid I don’t have it right now... But, uh, I’d be more than happy to give it to you...?”

“Yeah, why don’t you stop by my work some day,” Frank suggests. “It’s called The Page Turner, it’s a tiny bookstore on the corner of 5<sup>th</sup> and Main Street.”

“Alright, cool. I love books.”

The words have barely made it past his lips but Gerard can already hear how utterly idiotic they sound. He blushes furiously, the warmth circling his ears and rapidly spreading to his forehead and neck. If he’s going to keep acting like an idiot he might as well jump right into the next open grave because this is pathetic.

“Yeah?” Frank grins, amused. “Good for you.”

“No,” he says hurriedly, his face burning hot. “I mean, yeah, I really *do* love books. I write them.”

“Seriously? Any I know of?”

“Um, I wrote ‘Danger Days’...? The one that the movie with the Killjoys and stuff is based on?” Gerard pulls a face and hopes it doesn’t sound like he’s bragging. “I don’t know, you might’ve seen it, it premiered not long ago –”

“Are you kidding me?” Frank gapes at him. “*You* wrote that...? That movie is fucking awesome, I watched it three times in a row or something!” He stares at him with an incredulous smile. “Okay, that definitely gives you an excuse to drop by the bookstore.”

Gerard opens his mouth to say that he doesn’t need an actual *excuse* to drop by but changes his mind when he realizes how eager that would make him seem. Why should he even be eager? He’s just met the guy and most likely he’s got a girlfriend around somewhere. A guy simply doesn’t look like *that* and willingly finds himself in a place like *this* without having some kind of love interest involved in his life. No, right now Gerard is better off going home.

“I’ll come by tomorrow. And here,” he adds awkwardly, handing him the marigolds. “They were meant for your grandfather’s grave but... do whatever you want with them.”

Frank accepts the flowers with a wide smile. “Awesome, I’ll see you tomorrow then. Oh, and welcome to Kellmington.”

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The next day, in between making scrambled eggs and looking through his project folder for what seems to be the hundredth time, Gerard casually mentions to himself that he’s going to meet Franklin’s grandson. He hasn’t seen the ghost in a while, no creaking floorboards and no inexplicable drafts, and the house feels remarkably empty. No matter how ridiculous it is Gerard is honestly a bit worried about him.

“You know, he looks exactly like you,” he tells the emptiness as he tucks the old photograph safely in his pocket. He lingers in the entrance hall with his hand resting on the doorknob, listening for any sounds out of the ordinary. “You should see him, Franklin. I really mean that.”

The bookstore where Frank works is probably the most obvious place in all of Kellmington; it’s easy to spot with its elaborate sign, which is shaped as a large wooden book and perched right above the entrance. A small bell tinkles above Gerard’s head when he enters, something that just enhances the emptiness he’s met with. He hesitates awkwardly by the door for a moment and glances around at the cramped surroundings. There’s muffled music emanating from a radio somewhere and a pot of flowers is standing on the counter. Gerard smiles when he recognizes them as the marigolds he bought yesterday.

He makes his way past the shelves and can’t help but single out the ‘W

– Z’ section, instantly spotting his name. He runs his finger over the perfect, unbroken book spines and pulls out his first ever bestseller, ‘Three Cheers for Sweet Revenge’. He thoughtfully brushes his hand over the glossy hardcover. The majority of the critics had fawned over it when it was published and it was his first written work to be translated into different languages. There are times when he finds himself picking it up and reading old passages over again, wondering how he even came up with this story in the first place. Nowadays he just feels a certain kind of dread while leafing through these old chapters. Maybe he won’t ever be capable of producing something great like that again; maybe it was all just a one-shot thing.

“You find anything of interest?”

The out-of-nowhere question startles him and he looks up, seeing Frank lean casually against the bookshelf with a smile on his face.

“Um... no. I was just...” Gerard trails off and he feels a little stupid standing there with his own book in his hands like he’s some closet narcissist. “I hope I’m not bothering you.”

Frank snorts loudly and gesticulates into the room. “It’s not like I’ve worked here for very long but I’ve already figured out when this place is quiet and when it’s busy – and trust me, it’s always quiet.” He points at the book Gerard is holding. “I started reading that one last night.”

“Oh... Well, okay. And what do you think so far?”

“Gotta admit it’s pretty captivating. I was supposed to go to sleep early but I couldn’t put the story down, I think I’m on page two-hundred-something already. Seriously, you have to start adding a picture of yourself on the back cover or something. I wouldn’t have made a fucking fool of myself yesterday if I’d known who you were.”

Gerard mutters something about how he didn’t make a fool of himself at all and decides to leave it at that before he starts rambling or blushing again. “Speaking of pictures –” He reaches into his pocket and hands him the photo of Franklin and Dale. “It’s in pretty good shape, it’s got dates and names on the back.”

“Wow...” Frank studies the picture with an appreciative nod, a brief trace of longing flitting across his face. “This is fuckin’ rad.” He rubs his hand over his chin and grins. “I really *do* look a lot like him though. That’s freaky as hell... Can I keep it?”

“Yeah, of course.”

There’s a moment of awkward silence where Frank bites his lip and Gerard clumsily puts the book back. He seriously considers picking a random genre, just so he can ask for Frank’s help and thus have an excuse for staying a little bit longer. He’s already leaning towards the cooking section of the shop when Frank beats him to it.

“Hey, so, I wanna thank you for giving me this...”

“That’s not necessary...”

“Sure it is! How about coffee?” He looks expectantly at him. “I have the whole day off tomorrow, if you got time?”

Gerard tucks his lip underneath his teeth, trying to stop the massive grin that’s about to spread across his face. He nods, maybe a little too eagerly, and he can’t believe how stupidly giddy he feels about the prospect of having coffee with Frank.

“Yeah, I have plenty of time. I’d really like that.”

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It’s raining again the following day, just a slow drizzle that gradually turns into a hard-knocking beat. By the time Gerard is ready to leave it’s pouring down so hard the gravel in his driveway skips.

Luckily, the small hole-in-the-wall café Frank suggested is easy to find and Gerard pulls up right next to the door. He connects a nervous stare with himself in the rearview mirror before he pops the collar on his coat and heads out in the relentless rain. Someone is holding the door for open him and it’s not until he’s made it inside that he looks up and sees Frank’s smiling face.

“Hey!” he says, his bright mood a complete mismatch against the current weather. “I’m really sorry for dragging you out of the house today.”

Gerard runs a hand through his soaking wet hair and can’t help but laugh. “When it rains it actually pours, huh?”

“Yeah, the weather around here is just one big misunderstanding.” He grins. “I’m glad you could make it though. Nobody else are stupid enough to head outside today anyway so we’ve basically got the whole place to ourselves.”



One cup of coffee turns into two and three as the hours pass by, and Gerard is surprised at how relaxed he is in Frank's company. The guy is funny and laidback, he's easy to talk to and definitely nice to look at, and even though they're two entirely different people it's like they know each other already. Gerard almost feels like he ended up in one of those clichés he promised himself he'd never write about.

He learns that Frank grew up in New Jersey, and that he's been working random jobs for the past few years while trying to make it in a band that unfortunately hit a dead-end. After his father recently passed away, his mother wanted to move back to the small town where he was born, and Frank decided to follow.

"I love Jersey and all, the music scene is awesome, but I started feeling a little restless. I just needed some time to think after my Dad died and I couldn't do that back there. And since I'm an only child I'm basically all my Mom's got left, so... I wanted to live close to her for a bit, you know, should she ever need anything."

"I'm really sorry to hear about your Dad. You said he passed away when he was sixty-seven? That's not much of an age to die at in these days."

Frank shrugs and smiles softly. "There's this rare heart condition that kinda runs in the family," he goes on explaining, and Gerard tries to keep a straight face while his stomach lurches with recognition. "My grandfather died from it when he was really young so that's why I never got to meet him. Hardly anyone has, not even my Dad. He's like this missing person everyone forgot all about."

"And what about you?" Gerard asks carefully. "Aren't you worried? About your heart...?"

"Nah, that's the weird thing, actually. They've been testing my heart regularly ever since I was a baby but they never found anything wrong with it. I'm the healthiest person my family has ever seen – and that gives me a perfect excuse to smoke, honestly." He grins and pats his pocket, which is bulging with a pack of twenties. "The disease skipped my generation or something, like a fifty-fifty thing with good genes maybe? I don't know. I was lucky but if I ever reproduce I'm pretty sure my offspring will be screwed."

"That's great," Gerard blurts out, catching his mistake too late. "I mean – not that part about your future kids," he continues quickly, "but you know, about you being healthy."

Frank just nods, his laugh tucked into a giggle. “Yeah, I know what you meant.” He gives it a quick thought before he grabs a clean napkin and pulls a pen out of his pocket. “Okay, you’re probably gonna think I’m lame but this is pretty much how smooth I am...” He scribbles down a phone number and then slides the napkin across the table. “If you ever wanna hang out some other time – feel free to call me.”

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The Allman-house isn’t in dire need of home improvement but Gerard decides to engage in a couple of DIY-projects anyway. The basement needs some thorough cleaning and the ceiling upstairs definitely needs a new coat of paint. He’s doing this mostly just to distract himself from the fact that he still can’t get himself to write anything. He’s avoiding checking his emails again, which is something he really shouldn’t do because Patrick is definitely prone to become so worried he might send out a search party for him. Gerard throws a guilty glance at the rough draft abandoned on the kitchen counter, knowing he’s just procrastinating.

His strategy is successful though, however bad it may be. The projects actually occupy him so much that he even forgets all about Frank, that is until he searches his coat pockets for his keys one day and finds Frank’s phone number instead. Gerard unfolds the crumpled napkin and absently traces the digits with his finger. He hasn’t seen Franklin ever since he screamed at him and he’s really starting to think he’s gone for good. The house feels too quiet to be haunted; it doesn’t even settle in the middle of the night anymore like it used to. On one hand he really wants Franklin to see his grandson. It might give him a sense of sorely needed peace to know that there’s a part of him, however distant and unknown, that still lives on and seems to be doing perfectly fine in life. On the other hand Gerard just wants to invite Frank over for coffee and enjoy his company without the ghost tagging along. He can’t even begin to imagine how horribly distracting that would be.

It’s not like he can help it anyway. He *wants* to hang out with Frank, it’s as easy as that, and it seems like Frank wants to hang out with him too. Besides, Gerard doesn’t want to be that asshole who collects phone numbers and then leaves people hanging. He pulls his phone out and composes an invitation, retyping it several times to make it sound breezy and casual and like he just thought of the idea. There’s no time to even get nervous before Frank has replied, accepting his invitation with an exclamation mark that makes Gerard feel like he’s

just won the fucking lottery. He writes that he's off work in a couple of hours and that he'll see him then.

Frank's old Toyota pulls up outside about two and a half hours later and by then Gerard has managed to clean one corner of the basement as well as halfheartedly tidying up in the kitchen. He hesitates in the hallway before opening up and peers through the side panel of the front door, watching him get out of his car. Frank shakes his hair out of his face and stops for a moment, his head tilted back as he stares up at the old house. There's an awed look on his face that Gerard feels like he could stare at forever, but when he finally steps out on the porch Frank's face breaks into a huge grin that is about a billion times better.

"Hey, thanks for the invitation! I've actually never been up here before," he admits. "Looks like you're taking good care of the place."

Gerard motions for him to come inside, smiling sheepishly. "Yeah, well, I think that's more thanks to the Allmans than me. They left it in pretty good condition."

"Modesty. Very cute."

They're about to have coffee in the kitchen when Gerard turns around and nearly ends up swallowing his tongue. Franklin has been MIA for several days but now he has suddenly returned, having materialized himself right next to Frank. He looks shockingly solid even in the piercing sunlight, like he's just another person who happened to join them in the kitchen, and he's staring at his grandson with an expression Gerard can't explain. It's the most impossible thing, seeing the two of them together like that. They're generations, even dimensions apart but still they're so close and exactly the same, each of them representing their respective parts of the family history. They're two different eras joined together in one and Franklin actually looks so real Gerard is convinced he has somehow made himself visible.

However, it doesn't seem like Frank is aware of the fact that his deceased grandfather is marveling at him, which is probably just as well. Only the goose bumps covering his tattoos reveal his body's immediate reaction to the ghost's presence. He looks back at Gerard, one eyebrow arched in confusion.

"You okay?"

"Uh, I... yeah." Gerard nods and tears his eyes away from the both of

them, his hands trembling as he busies himself with the coffee maker. He simply can't have Franklin around; it's impossible to ignore him and act like nothing when things are like this. "I just... I think I have to go check something in the, uh, the upstairs bathroom. The drain makes this weird noise sometimes."

"Really? I didn't hear anything."

"Yeah, no, it's not always... you know, easy to catch. But, um, help yourself to some coffee in the meantime, okay?" He backs clumsily out of the kitchen, trying to make eye contact with the ghost but to no avail. "I'll be right back, just – just excuse me for a second."

He hurries upstairs, covering two steps at a time, and immediately locks himself in the bathroom. "Franklin...?" He closes his eyes and targets the ghost with all his thoughts, intently willing him to materialize. "*Franklin!*" he hisses when nothing happens. "Stop messing around and get in here!"

"The boy sure is handsome."

The voice is loud and abrupt and Gerard almost jumps right out of his skin. When he opens his eyes he sees Franklin in the mirror. His hazy features have replaced his own reflection, like a vague double-image exposed under the harsh light, and the memory of their first encounter is activated somewhere in the back of Gerard's mind.

"He looks healthy too," the ghost continues, smiling. "That's great."

"Alright, listen." Gerard shoots him a serious look, taking on a negotiating tone that he hopes sounds determined enough. "You really can't stick around right now. I mean it, you seriously need to get out."

"Why?" The fake reflection in front of him tilts its head. "I'm not doing anything wrong. The kid can't even see me."

"But he can *feel* you," Gerard argues intently, trying to keep his voice down. "You're hanging over his shoulder, Franklin. Trust me, he can tell."

"You can't stop me from seeing my grandson."

"Yes, I *can*," he mutters through his teeth and threateningly points a finger at him. "I will dig you up and burn your bones, I swear to God. We're not having this discussion right now because the living outnumbers the dead here, okay? Just... be a little more discreet, at

least. Don't fucking pop up out of nowhere, it scares the crap out of me and I don't want him to think I'm crazy."

Franklin rests his hands on his hips, staring defiantly back at him for a few seconds until he surrenders with an irritable huff. "Alright, fine. I promise I'll leave you kids alone." He turns blurry for a second or two before he drops back into focus, like he changed his mind. "Could you do me a favor and give him my letter?"

The request is unexpected and Gerard shifts awkwardly, not sure where Franklin is going with this. "Don't you think that's a little too soon...? I don't know him *that* well. This is even the first time he's ever been here, I mean it's kinda –"

"I think he's struggling with a couple of things."

The interruption kills off the rest of Gerard's protest and he frowns at the ghost, puzzled. "What do you mean he's struggling?"

"I don't know, I can't read his mind or anything, but I caught a feeling from him that I recognized. He's just a little conflicted." The ghost looks at him, a pleading light in his dull eyes. "Just give it to him, say you accidently found it somewhere. It's the only way I can do something for him and I'd really like to. I'm sure he'll appreciate it."

Needless to say, Gerard has his doubts about this. It seems like a far too personal and dramatic way to end an innocent coffee date and God knows how Frank is going to react. He doesn't want to offend him or freak him out and then having to watch him storm out of the house. On the other hand he knows that it's not up to him to decide what to do with the letter. He's not the one who wrote it and Frank is family, after all. If anything, it belongs to him now.

"Okay, but I'm not telling him about you," he adds firmly. "The last thing I want is to scare him away."

Franklin thanks him but lingers there in the mirror, a wistful look upon his face. "I honestly never thought I'd live to see something like this. And I *didn't*, strictly speaking, but at least I'm still around to experience it. Seeing that boy beats everything," he admits quietly. "I haven't felt like this in... well, in decades."

"Hey, I'm sorry about yelling at you the other night," Gerard says sincerely. "I had no right to lose it like that."

"Oh, you had every right. I crossed a line I shouldn't have crossed and

I needed a reminder anyway.” Franklin shrugs. “Sometimes I forget I’m not supposed to be here.”

When Gerard finally heads downstairs again he’s got Franklin’s letter in his pocket and his heart high in his throat. Frank shoots him a curious look as soon as he enters the kitchen. “Everything okay?”

“Uh, yeah, sure. Sorry I had you waiting.”

“Dude, I gotta say – this house is actually perfect.” Frank looks around and smiles contently, unknowingly bringing the topic up. “It’s so weird to think that my grandfather used to live here. Like, he probably used to sit right here where I’m sitting now and that just blows my mind.” He shudders unwillingly and rubs a hand over the goose bumps on his arm. “Pretty sure something’s wrong with your thermostat though, you should get that checked.”

“Yeah, about the house...” Gerard distractedly pours himself a cup of coffee, his hand brushing over the small bulge in his pocket. “I’ve been doing a lot of tidying up in the attic lately and I... I found something else after your grandfather.”

“Really?” Frank sits up, eyening him with great interest. “More photographs?”

“No... Not exactly.” Gerard awkwardly hands him the letter. “I didn’t mean to read it but... this is probably gonna change a couple of things for you. I figured you should know about this, since you hardly know anything about him in the first place.”

Frank searches his face before he finally takes it, his expression torn between suspicion and curiosity. The kitchen is filled with heavy silence while he reads and Gerard waits anxiously, watching the way his eyebrows slowly pull together and then how his frown is gradually smoothed out and replaced by surprise. When he’s done he keeps staring at the fragile piece of paper, rendered speechless.

“Oh man...” He lets out a shaky laugh, his eyes skimming through the letter one more time. “I... I had no idea Dad’s side of the family was so messed up. This is just... I seriously don’t know if anyone besides my grandmother knew about this. She passed away when I was little but I know she never returned to Kellmington. I always thought something weird was up with that so I guess – I guess this explains it...” He leans forward, his chin resting in his hand. “Wow... It’s sad that everything got so fucked up he felt he had to do this.”

"I'm sorry," Gerard says quietly.

"Yeah, well. I was probably bad timing and just bad... everything." Frank shrugs one shoulder. "Can't exactly say he was the best decision maker but... I understand where he's coming from. I really do."

He spares Gerard a quick meaningful glance, his hazel eyes taking on a golden shade in the glow from the afternoon sun. Gerard's cheeks grow hot in an instant and he has no idea what to say, so he just clears his throat and gesticulates at Frank's hands.

"Uh, anyway, I hope this clears things up for you."

Frank looks at him for a long moment, his lips pursed thoughtfully. "Yeah, it did, thanks," he says at last and gives him a crooked smile. "Things have never been clearer."

He doesn't elaborate on this, just carefully folds the letter up. He tucks it away in his pocket and elegantly changes the topic into something lighter and work-related, not mentioning his grandfather again for the rest of his stay.

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A few days after Frank's visit, Gerard receives a surprise message from his mother saying he needs to stay home because they're on their way. He looks around, considering vacuuming the living room and cleaning the windows, but he eventually decides against it. Parents, and especially mothers, have their own way of showing up when least expected anyway. If he goes out of his way to make things look nice and homely she'll think it's out of character and probably assume something's wrong.

It takes little over three hours before Gerard hears the crunching of gravel in his driveway, followed by the insistent sound of the doorbell. He has barely opened the door when he's pulled into his mother's embrace. She plants a huge wet kiss on his cheek and then shoves a box of homemade cookies into his hands.

"Honey, I've missed you!" she exclaims, before she starts gesticulating angrily at him. "And just because you buy this big house out in the middle of nowhere doesn't mean you stop calling your mother! I swear to God you and your brother are exactly the same."

"Mom, I –"

Gerard never gets to tell her he's sorry before she starts squeezing his arms, worried. "Since when did you get so skinny?" She pokes him in the ribs, something which actually hurts quite a bit. "Don't you eat anything anymore?"

"Mom," he repeats with a little more feeling and gives her a disarming kiss on the cheek, "I'm an adult and nothing's wrong. Please don't worry about me."

She still looks skeptical. "Don't tell me I'm not supposed to worry. It's a good thing we stopped on the way to buy groceries for you," she adds, brushing past him before Gerard can protest. "You are obviously starving."

"What do you mean you stopped for groceries?" He stares after her. "Mom?"

"They're in the car, honey, go help your father."

"Goddamnit." Gerard gives a sigh and makes his way outside, where his father is busy juggling shopping bags. "Hey, Dad – let me get those for you." He grabs two of the brown bags and peers into them. He can see an abundance of vegetables and *no* canned food whatsoever; it's all wholesome and fresh and needs to be eaten within a week, tops. "What the hell, you didn't have to do this. I can take care of my own shopping."

"You've been dwelling in our basement long enough to give your mother doubts, apparently. Be glad she didn't buy you clothes as well," his father adds. "There was a sale at the mall and I just barely talked her out of it."

Gerard rolls his eyes. "Can't believe I'm still eight years old."

At the insistent request of his mother he shows them around the house and the property, at the same time sacrificing Franklin a grateful thought for keeping out of the way. They end the small tour with coffee and cookies out on the patio and he feels a childish kind of pride when his parents express how lovely the place is and how well they think he's doing. They both admit they've been thinking about him a lot lately, his mother more than anyone, but she seems more relaxed now that she's got firsthand proof of his well-being – at least until she starts worrying again. They ask him how he's getting on with the writing and a sting of bad conscience settles in Gerard's gut when he tells them everything is just fine.



“You guys sure you don’t wanna stay over?” he suggests as he walks them to the door, asking more out of politeness rather than a genuine wish. “It’s a long drive back.”

“Oh, not this time, baby,” his mother says, to Gerard’s quiet relief. “But you keep that offer in mind for Christmas, we’ll bring the rest of the family.”

After they’ve left he finds himself staring into the fridge at all the fresh food they forced on him. He is the only person in this house – the only *living* person at least – and there’s no way he’s capable of eating everything before it expires. This is so typical of his mother. Bless her caring heart but she always shops way too much, whether it’s food or clothes or various ‘two-for-one’ offers, and that tendency seems to double whenever she shops for someone else. Gerard moves the carrots and bell peppers around a little hopelessly and then an idea drops into his head; he could always have dinner guests over.

He closes the door to the fridge and grabs his phone before he can change his mind. Gerard listens intently to the dial tone, his heart picking up pace, and he prays that Frank is actually home on a Friday night. He probably isn’t though, not a guy like him. He’s most likely got plans; he’s got someone else to hang out with, someone who is much more –

“Hello?”

“Hey, Frank? Uh, it’s Gerard.”

“Oh, hey! How are you?”

“I’m good, thanks.” Gerard paces around the kitchen in an uneven circle, playing nervously with a button in his shirt. “Listen – are you... busy? I mean, tonight?”

There’s a second of puzzled silence at the other end. “No... *why?*”

“Well, my parents came over earlier today and my Mom found it good to do some grocery shopping for me. The thing is, she bought enough to feed a small army so I wondered if you’d like to come over? For dinner?”

The offer comes out sounding like an endless ramble and his heart sinks when he notices Frank’s hesitation. He’s not interested. Of course he isn’t. The last time he came over he received no less than the suicide letter written by his own grandfather so the house obviously

gives him bad associations. Gerard drags his hands across his face and chokes back a sigh. Now he just made himself look like some weird desperate author holed up in a house nobody else were stupid enough to buy.

*"That's awesome, Gerard, really,"* Frank begins and Gerard holds his breath, waiting for him to turn him down. *"It's just that... you should probably know that I can't eat – I mean, it's not that I'm picky or anything but I have a whole bunch of food allergies...? So I don't know what you had planned but that probably complicates things for you. I'm sorry,"* he adds, and he actually sounds genuinely upset. *"I'd love to come over though. I'd really, really love to, I just... I don't want you to go through any extra bother just because of me and my fucked up stomach."*

"Oh." Gerard stares into the air, stunned. "Well, I – that's not a problem, actually." He tilts his head to catch his phone between his shoulder and his ear, rushing to find pen and paper. "I'll totally make something you can eat safely. Just let me know what you're allergic to."

*"Are you sure?"* Frank sounds both hopeful and embarrassed. *"Because I really don't wanna bother –"*

"No, it's no bother!" Gerard exclaims quickly and uncaps the pen with his mouth. "Just tell me."

Frank lists his allergies and most of them are unproblematic compared to the ingredients in Gerard's fridge. He assures him it's fine once again and suggests dinner at six o'clock.

*"Oh, uh... okay. Yeah. Awesome."* He can practically hear Frank grin. *"I'll be there, of course."*

Gerard isn't exactly a master chef – and judging from the number of microwave dinners he's resorted to through the years he wouldn't even call himself a chef, period – but if he's given a step-by-step recipe that tells him precisely what to do, when to do it and for how long, he usually ends up with a decent meal. Luckily, there's something on Google for everything. He decides to go for a chicken recipe that looks like it doesn't require too much multi-tasking, along with some kind of vegetable side dish for the sake of variety. Surprisingly enough the chicken turns out nice, although looking at his vegetable dish he realizes he went overboard with the tomatoes. Gerard sighs and finds a fork, halfheartedly attempting to scrape some of the potato slices and cheese cubes up from the bottom of the bowl.

He moves nervously around the kitchen while he waits, alternating between checking the driveway and setting the table. He debates whether or not to serve wine but then he remembers that tonight's menu basically consists of chicken and fucking tomatoes and is probably best served with something less pretentious. When Frank shows up ten minutes past six Gerard has thankfully abandoned the idea about lighting candles (because what the hell, it's *not* supposed to be a romantic date).

"Alright, Franklin," he mutters as he goes to open the door. "No offence, but please be somewhere else tonight."

By some miracle Franklin seems to be listening. As the evening progresses Gerard forgets worrying about the ghost's tendency to pop up unannounced, finally relaxed and comfortable enough to become absorbed in his conversation with Frank. Frank on the other hand has changed since the last time he saw him. It's nothing drastic or worrying, it's hardly even noticeable, but there's definitely something about him that's different. Gerard sneaks a curious glance at him as they clear the table and he can't exactly put his finger on it but Frank looks... content.

Gerard suggests they have a beer out on the patio and tells Frank to go ahead while he puts the leftovers away. When he joins him outside with their drinks he's met with a raised eyebrow and a questioning look. "What about you?" Frank asks, nodding at the water bottle in his other hand. "You don't drink?"

"No, I'm all set. Here, take it," Gerard insists. "It's perfect weather for a beer."

"So..." Frank pops the cap with his lighter. "Does this mean the beer in your fridge is strictly for special occasions?"

"Maybe this is one?" Gerard says, only to receive a joking smirk in response.

"Or maybe you're just trying to get me drunk."

They sit in silence for a little while, just enjoying the early summer temperature and each other's company. Gerard leans back against the garden chair and steals another look at Frank, watching how his dark hair curls at his neck, how the shadows blend with the shades of his tattoos and how his lips are softly drawn into a tiny smile that he doesn't even seem to be aware of.

“Can I ask you something?” Frank is the one who breaks the silence.

“Sure.”

He looks over at him, frowning a little. “What made you move to Kellmington?”

Gerard knew this would be brought up at one point. He plays absently with the cap of his water bottle, carefully considering his question. He has an obvious choice when it comes to answering this; tell him something vague or tell him everything. There’s nothing in between.

“I guess you won’t take ‘writing’ for a sufficient answer?”

Frank shrugs. “Well, I could believe that if only you came out here twice a year or something but you’ve actually moved out here for good.” He gesticulates at their surroundings and lets out a high-pitched laugh that almost passes as a giggle. “It’s fucking *Kellmington*, man, of all places. It’s beautiful and quiet, yeah, but you don’t end up here unless there’s a reason.”

Gerard looks down at the bottle in his hands, hesitantly biting his lip. Once again, he’s about to make himself look like *that* reclusive author, something he would rather avoid, especially when it comes to Frank. He wants to be himself for once, it’s just that he is exactly that somewhat off-center writer who bought an old haunted house a few months ago. Apart from his past and his current restlessness there’s really not much else that defines him. He honestly never *planned* the move to Kellmington; he was running away and happened to end up here. He could have chosen to settle anywhere. It wasn’t so much the place that brought him here as it was his mind. Then again, what else can he say? He might as well confide in him.

“For a while I couldn’t write,” he finally admits. “After my third book I was pretty... uninspired. The press asked me about my new work all the time and I talked about it like it was no big deal, but in reality I had nothing. And it wasn’t just a case of writer’s block, it was... I’d written myself empty, if that makes sense. I had no idea how I was supposed to deal with that feeling, it was like I’d lost something vital.” He pauses, halfheartedly shrugging one shoulder. “So I got a little desperate in the end and, uh, I started drinking. A lot. Long story short I ended up in a car accident that got me two months in jail and ninety days in rehab. It was a mess.” Gerard smiles wryly. “I’m still having a little trouble writing, to be honest with you. So until I have something to show my publisher besides gossip and rumors, I decided I’d rather

have everyone wonder where the hell I went.”

Frank is quiet for a little while, a bit worried as he watches him through the shadows. “Does that mean you still feel empty?”

Gerard sighs quietly and glances up at the Allman-house and the dark windows of the second floor. It’s been a while since he had his last encounter with all-consuming inspiration. He can’t remember the last time he spent whole days and nights writing nonstop, like possessed by something outside of himself. He hasn’t felt something like that in the longest time. Come to think of it he doesn’t even need to feel all that inspired anymore. He just wants to have the desire to create something, but it looks like he doesn’t even have that to back him up.

“Sometimes I do,” he admits, nodding slowly. “It’s not as bad as it was, obviously, but... yeah.”

“Well... I don’t believe things are ever up to fate alone... but sometimes people end up in the most unlikely places because they’re supposed to. I guess you can never know.” Frank hesitates, teeth tugging at his lip. “And for what it’s worth – and for what Kellmington’s worth – I’m really glad you moved out here.”

A silent moment passes where they exchange a few awkward glances and Gerard doesn’t realize he’s holding his breath until Frank looks away to check his watch. “Shit, it’s way past midnight already.” He puts his empty beer bottle away and gets up. “I’m so sorry, I didn’t mean to drag this out.”

“It’s not a problem, really...”

Frank just shakes his head with a smile. “No, I should leave, I don’t wanna overstay my welcome or anything. But thanks for tonight, Gerard,” he adds sincerely. “I had a real good time.”

Gerard follows him through the house and into the entrance hall. He picks Frank’s denim jacket down from its hook to give to him and Frank’s fingers brush softly over his knuckles as he reaches for it. His hand lingers over Gerard’s, his palm pressed against his skin. For a few seconds they’ve surrendered themselves to frozen silence, a continuation of what happened outside in the garden.

“So...” Gerard says awkwardly. “Drive safely.”

“I’ll do that.” Frank steps closer, his gaze glued on Gerard’s lips.

“And I’ll... I’ll see you again soon.”

Frank barely gets out a whispered “sure” before he leans in to kiss him. At first it’s innocent and careful, like an unsure afterthought, and it would have ended up as nothing but a change of heart if Gerard hadn’t parted his lips and allowed Frank to deepen the kiss. Frank jumps on the opportunity and slips his tongue past his lips, leaving a faint but sweet taste of beer. His hands are everywhere and the jacket drops to the floor as Gerard grabs at Frank’s shirt and tugs him closer.

“Or maybe you should stay over,” he breathes into the small space between their mouths.

“Yeah, I’ve had a beer.” Frank drops kisses along his jaw, his breath hot against his skin. “I really shouldn’t drive.”

Somehow they clumsily manage to find their way towards the stairs, mouths connected and hands pulling at hair and clothes. They’re only halfway when Gerard receives a light nudge that makes him lose his balance and he falls against the wall, causing the pictures to rattle threateningly above their heads. They collapse together right there in the middle of the darkened stairs, not really getting anywhere in their impatience. The hard wooden steps are painfully digging into Gerard’s back but he couldn’t care less because Frank’s hands are already in the process of unbuttoning his jeans.

“What the hell are these stairs?” Frank pants as he tugs insistently at Gerard’s clothes. “Fuck this, seriously.”

There’s already a beginning strain in Gerard’s boxers and it’s a relief when he’s exposed, his hips bucking out of reflex when Frank wraps his hand around him. He’s about to suggest moving further to the bedroom before they actually do this but Frank’s mouth is already pressed against the base of his dick and his response is reduced to a choked gasp.

Gerard bites hard down on his lip and fervently grabs Frank by the hair, unable to comprehend that they were literally sitting outside talking just a few minutes ago and now Frank is blowing him in the middle of the fucking stairs, his lips slick and hot and amazing against his skin.

There’s another fumbling clatter of a belt buckle and seconds later Frank moans loudly, revealing that he’s managed to undo his jeans and gotten his hand fisted around himself; Gerard he can see the moving outline of his arm. Frank goes down as far as he can and

moans again, the sound muffled and choked at the back of his throat and Gerard can *feel* the faint vibrations in his dick. He groans and throws his head back, accidentally hitting himself on one of the steps behind him but his brain is too scrambled to even register the pain. Frank's eyelids flutter and he shoots him a quick glance, deliberately connecting his stare with him. His face is halfway concealed in the shadows but his hazel eyes are glittering and his cheeks are hollowed and flushed, his lips stretched tightly around him. He's so into it and Gerard knows he's not going to last long if he keeps this up.

"Stop," he gasps, thinking he must be crazy for even suggesting it. "Stop –" he repeats, grabbing fistfuls of Frank's hair and pulling insistently. "I don't – Frank – wait –"

With a small complaint Frank reluctantly moves, his lips sliding slowly up Gerard's cock and coming off with a faint, wet *pop*. He leans over him and kisses him, almost teasingly. "What's that?" he murmurs against his mouth.

"Wait," Gerard repeats, his voice strained. He yanks impatiently at Frank's arm, urging him to get the hell up.

They struggle onto their feet and up the rest of the stairs. Frank's hands are busy fumbling with Gerard's shirt and he's breathing hotly against his lips, at the same time willingly allowing himself to be steered in direction of the bedroom and then pushed onto the bed. His mouth is drawn into a wicked grin as he drags Gerard down on top of him and their limbs are caught in sleeves and pant legs as they clumsily undress, but somehow they manage to get each other naked in between the kisses.

It's when Frank wraps his arms around his shoulders and pulls him closer that Gerard is unwillingly reminded of Franklin, and the sudden image of him hits him out of nowhere. He can't tell them apart in the semi-darkness and the situation strikes him as so similar to the dream he had that it throws him off a little. He breaks the kiss, pulling back so he can breathe while his brain leaps headfirst into panic. Maybe this wasn't such a good idea. Maybe they should slow things down and get to know each other better first. After all Gerard is really fucking serious about this and he doesn't want to ruin everything for such a ridiculous reason as a *ghost*. If he'd only dealt with that first he would have avoided awkward moments like these. Fuck, he's such an idiot.

His nerves have him incapacitated for a few moments but he's

snapped out of it when Frank reaches up to brush his hair out of his face. He studies him with a doubtful frown although he doesn't say anything; he just proceeds to grab Gerard's hand and carefully guides it down, pressing it against his chest. Gerard follows up on the silent encouragement and hesitantly slips his hand over his skin, finding himself gradually mesmerized by the way his own trembling fingers explore the intricate patterns and bold letters of his tattoos.

Frank lies completely still, watching him. "We don't have to, you know," he finally says, palms resting lightly on Gerard's shoulders. "If you don't want to or something then it's totally okay."

Gerard repeats the words over again in his head, trying to see if there's some hidden disappointment or accusation in them, but they sound so comforting and so sincere that he knows he's being stupid about this. Frank simply is nothing like his grandfather. Maybe they're similar in a number of ways but Frank is the only one that exists fully in the present. He's there with him right now, close and attentive and *alive*. This has got nothing to do with Franklin at all.

Gerard quickly shakes his head. "No, I was just thinking..."

"What?"

"Nothing, I just... I think you're beautiful."

"And that's *nothing*?" Frank arches an eyebrow and grins. "Thanks a lot, man."

He pulls him down into a kiss, sighing softly into his mouth. When they break apart Gerard wordlessly kisses Frank's jaw and moves further down, pressing his lips against his throat and tracing his tongue along the bony slope of his collarbone. He finally stops at his chest, where he scatters kisses across the large webbed motive stretched out across his skin. Frank is breathing heavily underneath him, his hands tangled gently in his hair and his body responding to Gerard's mouth with small needy twitches.

"You gonna fuck me or not?"

He looks up and sees Frank smirking at him, an urgent expression of amusement and impatience evident in his face. Gerard lets out a breathless chuckle before reaching out towards the nightstand. His hands are shaking a little as he pulls lube and a pack of condoms out of the cluttered drawer, in his quiet mind relieved that he actually keeps these things no matter how much his subconscious has been



pushing for life as a recluse.

He can feel Frank's eyes on him and he attempts to hide his blush with a disarming smile. "It's been a while," he admits awkwardly.

"Don't worry about it," Frank murmurs, trailing his hands down Gerard's chest. "It doesn't matter."

Gerard leans heavily against him and kisses him again, feeling the eager willingness in Frank's tense body. He fumbles one-handedly with the cap on the lube and blindly slicks up his fingers, and not allowing for any more hesitation he slips them between Frank's legs. Frank bucks his hips in response and moans softly when Gerard presses his fingers inside him, first one and then two, slowly thrusting them in and out. Frank keeps his hands fisted in Gerard's hair, his jaw slack and his gaze unfocused, and soon he starts moving, small whimpers escaping his throat as he pushes himself impatiently against Gerard's hand.

Neither of them says anything when he pulls his fingers out and sits back on his heels. Gerard avoids eye contact and busies himself with the condom, his fingers trembling as he rolls it on. There seems to be no reason or need for them to talk and Gerard is grateful for that. He bends down again and captures Frank's mouth with his own. He traces his bottom lip with his tongue as he lines himself up, carefully biting down on the soft flesh as he slowly sinks into him, not stopping until he's buried all the way. Frank lets out a breathless moan, clawing at his back and arching his hips, desperate for contact.

Gerard sets a slow, unsure pace to begin with, remembering that they strictly don't know each other that well. He doesn't want to accidentally hurt him or do something wrong but it doesn't take a lot of hesitant movements for Frank to pick up on this; he reaches up and determinately drags him down into a distracting kiss, trying to get across that all he needs to do is to keep going and he'll be good.

The contact between them is all slick skin and feverish heat and Gerard groans, dropping down and connecting their mouths once more. Frank curls up underneath him and digs his heels insistently into Gerard's thighs, the arch of his body urging him to move faster, harder. Their kisses gradually become more and more erratic, constantly interrupted by shallow gasps and loud moans, and it doesn't take long before Frank's hand creeps down between them to jerk himself off.

Gerard pushes hard into him, burying himself deeper, and just the mere sight of Frank throwing his head back and squeezing his eyes shut every time he bottoms out is almost enough to drive him over the edge. He presses his lips against his exposed neck, teeth scraping over his scorpion tattoo, and in the end it's hardly necessary for Frank to touch himself at all. He arches his back and comes with tense jaws and a cut-off moan, striping the birds and stars seared into his skin. His body is still writhing with aftershocks when Gerard follows. He finishes with stuttering hips and a broken curse that is choked by Frank lips, trapping him in a deep kiss that leaves him gasping for air.

"Holy shit," Frank breathes out when Gerard collapses next to him.

"Yeah," Gerard agrees stupidly, not knowing what else to say. It feels like his brain has shut down and eliminated his vocabulary without leaving him with a backup.

Frank pushes his sweaty hair out of his face and rolls over on his side, facing him. "Told you." He jokingly gives his shoulder a lazy nudge. "Told you I was glad you moved to Kellmington."

Gerard grins and reaches out, urging him closer. "Couldn't have made a better choice."

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When Gerard wakes up the next morning Frank is gone. He watches the weak dent in the pillow next to him, sleepiness leaving him while disappointment slowly settles in the pit of his stomach. He rolls over on his back and drags his hands across his face. That someone leaves the morning after without saying anything is usually not a good sign. It was fucking stupid anyway; too soon and too serious.

He's staring up at the roof, battling conflicting feelings of embarrassment and anger, when he suddenly becomes aware of the sounds emerging from downstairs – the kitchen, more specifically. Gerard pushes himself up on his elbows and tilts his head, listening intently. There is definitely someone else in the house. He slips out of bed, hastily pulling on his boxers and a t-shirt and tiptoes downstairs. It doesn't sound like Franklin; it's far too noisy and determined to be the ghost's quiet shenanigans. Gerard regrets not bringing anything to defend himself with but he doesn't really own anything like a bat or a golf club. He doesn't even have an umbrella in the house.

He sneaks through the entrance hall and the closer he gets to the kitchen, the deeper he frowns. It smells like coffee and toast and...

scrambled eggs? Gerard peers around the corner, his heart caught in his throat – and then he just remains there in the door, staring.

“Frank...?”

Frank turns around with a smile on his face and a cooking spatula in his hand. “Oh hey, there you are. I wanted to wake you earlier but you were knocked out. So, um, I took the liberty of invading your kitchen? I hope that’s cool with you,” he adds unsurely, pointing at the stove.

Gerard blinks at him. “I – of course, I just... I thought you’d left.” All of a sudden he feels a bit self-conscious standing there half naked. He should have put some pants on.

“Come on, I’m not *that* much of a douche. I’m not fucking stupid either.” Frank grins, quickly looking him up and down before he gestures in direction of the kitchen counter. “Coffee’s ready, by the way. I’ll run outside and get the paper.”

With that he jogs out of the kitchen before Gerard has even gathered enough coherent thoughts for a proper response. He stares after him, his mouth hanging slightly open. Frank actually stayed. He let him sleep in and fucking stayed to prepare breakfast for them. Who even does that anymore? He pours himself a cup of coffee, hardly believing his luck, only to have it replaced with worry a few minutes later when Frank walks back inside with a defeated look on his face.

“Okay, so, uh... change of plans, I’m afraid.” He throws the rolled-up newspaper on the table. “Mom just called. Apparently she promised a friend she’d help her move some furniture today but neither of them wanna drive with a cargo trailer... So it looks like you’re having breakfast alone.”

The sunlight is cutting perfectly through the tall windows and Gerard nods slowly, trying his best to mask his disappointment. He was really looking forward to spending the next lazy couple of hours together with Frank.

“Oh... Right. Well, your Mom needs your help,” he says softly. “Of course you should go.”

Frank heaves a quiet sigh, looking genuinely sorry. He walks over to him and rests his fingertips on Gerard’s cheek, his eyes on fixed his mouth. Then he leans forward and kisses him lightly. “I like you.” He pulls back and searches his face. “I really, *really* fucking like you. I

don't want this to end here."

Gerard returns the kiss, closing the space between them. "You can always come back when you're done," he mutters, his lips carefully brushing Frank's. "If you can't deal with the separation, I mean."

Frank raises an eyebrow at him and smirks. "You think *you* can?"

He reaches down and starts rubbing him slowly through the fabric of his boxers, his eyes locked on Gerard's. Gerard leans heavily against the counter and arches his back when Frank slips his hand beneath the waistline. He tilts his head back and lets out a choked sigh at the feel of his warm fingers wrapped tightly around him, urging him to full hardness.

Frank moves his other hand behind his neck and pulls him into a kiss. He continues to sloppily make out with him while he jerks him off, his movements aimed at getting him off as quickly as possible. Gerard's muscles are still aching from last night and he sighs into Frank's mouth, wordlessly begging for release.

"Come on," Frank whispers encouragingly, his hand moving faster around his cock. He's breathing hotly against his skin now, planting small warm kisses on his neck that send shivers down Gerard's spine. He whimpers faintly and clasps the edge of the counter, his hips bucking in an erratic attempt to match Frank's pace.

"Fuck – I –"

Gerard barely manages to get the words out before he thrusts one final time and spills himself into Frank's hand, his loud moan bouncing off the wooden walls. He tilts his head against Frank's temple, chest heaving.

"Is this how you show people you like them?" He pulls back to look at him, a stupidly dazed smile on his lips.

"Never." Frank grins and swiftly presses another kiss against the corner of his mouth. "Just you."

He heads to the bathroom to wash his hands and Gerard feels too weak at the knees to go anywhere so he just remains where he is, letting the sun fall square on his chest. The warm light mixes with the rapidly cooling sweat on his skin and the sensation creates goose bumps on his arms. When Frank returns he spots the flushed roses blossoming on Gerard's cheeks and even though he doesn't comment

on it he looks entirely pleased with himself.

“You know what?” he says as he crouches down to tie his shoelaces.

“What?”

Frank doesn't reply right away and spends the few seconds it takes to tie his shoes in silence. When he straightens up his smug expression is gone. “That letter you gave me... That kinda changed everything.”

“Of course it did... You learned the truth about your grandfather.” Gerard's not sure why he's bringing this up now.

“Yeah, but it's not just that. Thing is...” He looks down at his hands and Gerard is slowly beginning to worry about this sudden mood change. “That day when I met you up at the cemetery I had already planned to leave Kellmington. I was gonna work for a little bit, save up and then move on as soon as possible.”

“Okay... And go where?”

“I have no idea,” Frank admits with a shrug. “I'd probably just end up drifting, like I used to.” He stops to think, searching for words.

“Actually, it's been that way for as long as I can remember. I'm restless when it comes to places and jobs and people. I've never had a plan for anything. And I know it doesn't always seem like it but I'm unsure of myself too, for whatever reason. I don't know, I just can't decide what I'm good at, where I belong, what I like... *who* I like.”

Frank bites his lip, the pink flesh turning bloodlessly white underneath his teeth as he sacrifices him a lingering glance. Gerard really wants to say something but it's obvious that Frank needs to get off his chest without any interruptions, so he keeps his mouth shut and waits for him to continue.

“The funny thing is... I *know* what to do. I just never trust myself so I do something else instead. But when I read what my grandfather wrote I realized how fucking pointless that is. It was hard for *him* to live like that and to make those choices, but he had plans. If the world had cut him some slack, I'm sure he would have gone for it. And here I am wondering why things never work out for *me*. I mean, of course they don't. I'm always unsure and that's making me miserable, so of course I'm not getting anywhere. I don't have anyone stopping me but myself and it's stupid. It's not like I wanna drift around forever... Especially not now that I've found you.”

Frank ends his rambling speech, which seems to have ended on a more passionate note than intended, and his cheeks rapidly turn light red. “I – uh, I hope all that made sense,” he adds, awkwardly rubbing his neck.

Silence fills the sunlit kitchen and it occurs to Gerard that the subtle change he noticed last night is exactly this, only added words. Frank is done being unsure and now he’s finding himself. He’s settling. He doesn’t know what to say so he just gestures for Frank to come closer and wordlessly cups his face in his hands. He kisses him gently, feeling the warmth of his palms press against his back as he wraps his arms around him. When they break apart Frank hums contently and tilts his forehead against Gerard’s, brushing the tips of their noses together, his breath cooling the small wet patch on Gerard’s bottom lip. They share a quiet moment until Frank spots the folder lying on the counter behind them.

“That your new book?”

Gerard’s stomach drops at the reminder and he barely manages to stifle a sigh. “A very incomplete version, yeah.”

Frank reaches behind him and leafs through the pages, quickly skimming the notes Gerard has jotted down. “This looks rad, seriously. I fucking love it.” He goes back and forth a few pages, frowning. “You sure you wanna make a novel out of this though?”

“Um... Why wouldn’t I?”

“I don’t know, but I feel like a concept like this could do with a couple of kickass illustrations. Just a suggestion.” He shrugs lightly and smiles, planting another kiss on the corner of Gerard’s mouth. “I really need to get going now before my Mom disinherits me. I’ll see you in a couple of hours, okay?”

After Frank has left, Gerard goes upstairs to get ready for the day. He’s lost in quiet contemplation while he showers and gets dressed, and it’s only when he’s back in the kitchen having cold toast and eggs that he’s finally decided what his actual problem is. He doesn’t want to express his narrative in a novel. Frank is right; his concept needs kickass illustrations. The whole story reads like a comic and he didn’t even realize that was an option until now. Gerard has been trying to work on something that needs to be rewritten entirely. No wonder he’s been stuck.

He immediately finds his phone and calls Patrick, who sounds like he’s

about to fall right out of his chair when he hears who it is. The guy has been genuinely worried about him and Gerard feels horrible for having avoided him for so long.

*“Are you sure about this?”* he asks tentatively when Gerard tells him about his change of plans. *“I mean, you and I do have a contract... And I’m guessing you can’t do this entire thing by yourself, so this means bringing a whole team in and I’m not sure how to go about that. I know I’ve told you that change is good because it usually means progress but in this case I must say it kinda complicates everything.”*

“Patrick, listen – we’ve known each other for a while now; we both know that our contracts are nothing but a formality and mostly for show.” Gerard pauses, deciding to add a small threat to the discussion even though he knows it’s a jerk thing to do. “Remember that I’ve been loyal to you and that you’ve reaped the benefits of that. Your publishing company is very successful and I honestly think I’m allowed my artistic freedom – unless, of course, you want to terminate the agreement. I can easily find another publisher who’d be pleased to have my name, so that’s not a problem.”

*“Hey, that’s not fair, don’t you dare go all diva on me!”* Patrick exclaims, sounding both offended and a little hurt. *“Look, Gerard, it’s not like I can promise you anything right here and now but... you do have a visionary mind that many authors would kill for... And you used to work with this kind of stuff, I mean you’re actually qualified, so if anyone can pull this off I guess it’s you...”* He considers it hesitantly, pressured to act, until he surrenders with a faint sigh. *“Alright, but if we’re doing this then you need to stop hiding in the woods and show up for a proper meeting – okay?”*

“That can be arranged.” Gerard grins. “I knew I could count on you, Patrick. I can’t even remember having a better publisher.”

*“That’s because you’ve never had another publisher, period.”*

“Which confirms exactly how great you are.”

Gerard hangs up with newfound inspiration bubbling in his chest, a wonderful feeling that seems to constantly double and spread throughout his body. This means he’s pretty much back doing what he used to do and he’s excited about it. Despite his lack of recent recognition in that field he’s been struck by a kind of passion he hasn’t felt since he had his first book published. It’s humbling to know that he’s freed from all expectations and that he needs to consult other

people for advice and help now that he's starting from scratch. He turns around, smiling at his phone, and almost walks straight into Franklin.

"What the –!" Gerard staggers backwards, nearly tripping over his own feet. "I've told you *not* to fucking do that! *God!*"

"I'm sorry, I keep forgetting that having a heart attack is still possible for you." The ghost glances around the kitchen, his arms resting behind his back. "Did Junior leave already?" he asks innocently.

"Oh, please spare me," Gerard mutters under his breath. He goes to pour another cup of coffee to calm himself down. "As if anything ever gets past you. I hope I don't need your blessing for being with him."

"You two already have my blessing," Franklin says sincerely. "I'm looking forward to watch your lives unfold in the future."

Gerard splutters at that, choking a little on the hot beverage and burning his tongue in the process. "What – what did you just say...?" He stares, intently hoping he got him wrong. "Watch our lives unfold? *You?* I'm sorry, but what makes you think I'm okay with that?"

The ghost looks confused. "Because you're with my grandson."

Gerard glares back at him, his head boiling. That's it; he's had it. He's dealt with this persistent mass of dead leftover energy for way too long and enough is enough.

"Don't you dare think I'm okay with having you around for the rest of my life. Honestly, Franklin – it's about time you left this world. You don't belong here; you haven't belonged here for a long fucking time. Let the place go and leave us alone."

Franklin falls quiet, his eyes narrowed and his mouth drawn into a taut line. His arms are hanging limply by his sides but his hands have balled themselves into fists. "Let the place go?" he repeats, his voice strangely hollow.

"Exactly right. I shouldn't have to worry about you spying on us every day. Your stay's long overdue and your host family has changed more times than you can even remember. I'm done putting up with your shit," Gerard adds, and he knows it sounds harsh but he doesn't care. "I live here now."

"Well. I *died* here," Franklin retaliates through gritted teeth, his voice



reduced to a menacing snarl. He locks his eyes on Gerard's face and they now seem to have lost their faded color, suddenly darkened with quiet rage. "And you don't know what that's like, *kid*."

Before Gerard can do or say anything to respond the ghost has vanished, so abruptly that he almost leaves an echo. Seconds later the half-empty cup on the counter shatters, literally *explodes* for no apparent reason, sending cold coffee and porcelain everywhere. Gerard throws his hands over his head and cowers, barely keeping himself from diving under the kitchen table. If he had been standing any closer he could have been injured.

"What the hell," he whispers, looking nervously around the kitchen. "Franklin –?"

The only response is a series of thumping noises emerging from upstairs. The rampage is currently in his bedroom, where it sounds like the drawers are being pulled right out the nightstand and the contents noisily scattered all over the floor. Gerard stares up at the roof, his mouth dry and his heart hammering. Right now he's scared. For the first time since he encountered the ghost his reaction to him is genuine fear. Maybe it was wrong to think of Franklin as harmless. He's capable of planning ahead, changing his appearance, even manipulating the perception of reality. He scared Brendon away because he didn't like him and altered Gerard's dreams to a point where he couldn't wake up. He can be powerful if he wants to and Gerard doesn't even know if it's possible to get through to him at this point. How stable can a ghost be? How rational was he even in the first place?

The upstairs doors are opened one by one and then slammed violently shut, as though someone is determined to break them, and Gerard can't see any other option than to get the hell out. An angry person is one thing but an angry *spirit* is something entirely else. As he escapes through the veranda doors and out in the garden, he wonders if anything is even going to be left of the house when he's done or if it's just going to shrivel up and implode, like a scene taken right out of fucking 'Poltergeist'. Gerard can only watch and listen helplessly, at a complete loss of what to do. The ghost seems to have moved downstairs to the kitchen again and there's a wrenching noise of cutlery being thrown around.

"Franklin?" Gerard takes a cautious step forward, hoping the coffee maker or something equally heavy isn't going to come flying out the window at him. "Frankie – please listen to me." He swallows and takes

another step closer, raising his voice a fraction. "I'm sorry, okay? I shouldn't have talked to you like that. And – and you're right! You're right, I totally have no idea what it's like to be you, to be dead, but... I do know what it's like to *feel* that way."

The rampant noise continues for a little while longer, reaching an earsplitting peak before it abruptly subsides, a piercing silence left in its wake. Gerard wrings his hands nervously and waits, scanning the empty windows in front of him. He's beginning to wonder if Franklin has disappeared when he happens to glance towards the scarlet oak and finds the ghost standing underneath the tree, partly hidden in the shadows. The sunlight drops in between the canopy of scattered leaves and falls on him in patches, erasing small parts of him every time he moves into their narrow beams. Again he looks fragile and weak, like he's just a natural part of the shadows, a brief mirage that will be gone with the blink of an eye.

Gerard doesn't know if it's safe to approach him or if he's just waiting to explode again, but he slowly makes his way over to him nonetheless. He stops a couple of feet away from him, waiting for him to say something.

"I'm sorry," Franklin mutters at last, his voice hardly carrying any sound.

"It's okay." Gerard smiles tentatively. "I think I know why you're doing this."

"Then tell me."

"Well... Your grandson shows up and by some miracle he wants to stay here, where you are. He's your chance to feel alive again, like a second shot at life. Of course it makes you angry to be denied that."

The faded soldier in front of him shrugs, avoiding eye contact. "I suppose you're right."

"I know how it feels when you think you've got that second chance figured out," Gerard admits. This time the ghost looks up at him, his head tilted curiously. "I'm not saying it's exactly the same as being dead because it's not. But I've hit rock bottom before and to be honest I've never felt less alive. I started drinking because nothing else worked and I was getting desperate, it's as simple as that. It helped a little to begin with and at one point I really believed it could bring back what I was missing... but after a while it only made it worse. It just hurt. And... I think that's how it'll turn out for you in the end."

Gerard searches Franklin's face for any trace of emotion. The ghost carefully considers his words and nods slowly, taking a deep, quiet breath.

"He's so young," he whispers, his expression strikingly sad and hopeful at the same time. "He's so young and I can feel it. He's like life itself, life like I remember it before the war and before everything else happened. He's like *me* and... it's wonderful. He just makes me want to stay."

"Yeah... I understand, I really do." Gerard's chest tightens and it forces him to stop and clear his throat. "But don't you think it would wear Frank out so much it would drive him away? Don't you think it would drive *me* away? Besides, Frank and I, we are... we're just people. People always leave, because we have to sooner or later. I'd hate for you to be stuck in that rut forever, with people always leaving you and never coming back. It isn't worth sticking around for, not in the long run."

Franklin looks down, kicking at the grass with the tip of his boot though his movements doesn't disrupt anything. When he speaks again his voice is so soft it seems like it's nothing but a part of the wind, a distant rustle of the leaves above them.

"When you moved in it was like Dale finally came home from the war. I don't know if it was wishful thinking but... when you walked through that door you reminded me so much of him. You even fully acknowledged the fact that I was there, instead of ignoring me. And when Junior came along I could hardly believe it. It was almost like it was meant to be, as if I didn't die in vain after all. I thought that by trying to be a part of your life I could..." He stops, slowly shaking his head. "I don't know what I thought. I guess I was trying to make the impossible happen."

"I'm never going to be Dale and you know that," Gerard says quietly, and he really wishes he could reach out and pull him into a hug. "I'm so sorry, Frankie. I think you have all right to be selfish and hang on to what you've missed, but you just don't deserve to be trapped here."

The ghost is quiet for a long time, thoughtfully surrendering himself to the breathing world around them. His frame seems to turn sharper for a brief moment, like a light flickering one last time before it dies out, and he looks up at Gerard, his hazel eyes the clearest they've ever been. "Can I ask you a favor?"

“Anything.”

“You don’t think you could have one for me?” Franklin nods at the cigarettes in Gerard’s pocket. “I used to smoke too when I was... when I was younger. It would be nice if we could just share one.”

Franklin watches closely, his expression a subtle mix of longing and hopefulness as he waits for him to light one. Gerard takes a long drag and leans closer to the ghost, so close that he can clearly feel an ice-cold shiver race down his spine. Franklin looks expectantly at him, his eyelids dropping shut as Gerard exhales slowly, letting the smoke stream past his lips to surround Franklin’s face. He leans into the feathery wisps, a small smile pulling at the corner of his mouth as he seemingly takes a lungful of air. After a small stretch of silence he opens his eyes and they’re trapped staring at each other.

“Did you – did you feel any of that?” Gerard asks, pulling back.

“I felt everything. Thank you.” Franklin’s smile grows wider, a faint twinkle in his eyes. Something in him flickers again, quickly and subtly, pulling him out of focus for a second or two. “Promise me you’ll take care of each other – alright?”

“Yeah.” Gerard nods quickly, the lump in his throat making it hard for him to speak. “I promise.”

Franklin glances over his shoulder, his eyes fixed on something only he can see. “I think it’s time to go look for that lost soldier now.”

The ghost slowly fades, right in front of Gerard’s eyes. His final passing is nothing like the way he died, which was painful and brutal, something that locked him up in haunted regret for so many years. This time he retreats into the surroundings, becoming part of the grass, the leaves and the sky, his body gently dissolving into nothing. Only the color of his eyes seems to linger, a hazel streak of sunlight cutting through the air, and the very last thing to disappear is the smiling curve of his lips.

Gerard doesn’t move out of the shadows underneath the scarlet oak for what feels like ages. He just watches the crumbling fragments of ash drift away from his half-finished cigarette as they get caught in the faint breeze. After a while he pulls himself together and heads back inside, his mind blank, and as he distractedly cleans up the mess Franklin left earlier he can hear tiny noises move unprovoked through the house. It’s like lingering traces of energy, manifested in the vague tinkle of glass, the soft pull of a chair, the faint creaking of a door –

and then complete silence, at last.

It's later, when he's sitting outside on the patio, that Gerard feels the urge to cry. The thought has hardly even crossed his mind before he has tears rolling down his cheeks. He draws his breath sharply, overwhelmed by this surprising surge of emotions. A heavy sense of nostalgia floods him, a wistful sting that borders on longing, but at the same time he doesn't feel sad. More than anything he is relieved. Franklin has finally let go of this world and Gerard is getting the full blast of the emotional backlash, where months' worth of sleeplessness and anger has come back to remind him that he's lucky to be alive and breathing.

"So this is where you're hiding."

Gerard looks up and sees Frank crossing the lawn. He quickly drags the back of his hand over his wet cheeks and hopes he won't notice.

"Sorry it took so long. I had to move way more furniture than I signed up for and it was just –" Frank cuts himself off when he spots Gerard's puffy eyes. "Hey, are you crying –?" He hurries towards him and grabs a chair, anxiously resting a hand on his shoulder. "What happened...?"

Gerard lets out an airy laugh and shakes his head. "It's nothing, don't worry." He blinks in an attempt to force the tears back but that doesn't seem to make any difference. Instead he reaches out and gently pulls Frank into a hug. "I'm just happy to see you, that's all."

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Eight months later Gerard is carrying a heavy cardboard box downstairs and just barely manages to catch his balance when he misses the last step. He exhales shakily and puts the box on the floor, deciding to take five there at the bottom of the stairs before he slips again and ends up breaking his neck. He sits down with a heavy sigh, his arms aching and his back complaining. The large black letters on the cardboard reads 'MISC. BOOKS IV' and he rolls his eyes when he thinks about box number V, VI and VII that are still waiting for him upstairs, all of them equally heavy. It's going to be a massive relief when they finally get everything loaded into the moving van.

"Looks like you could use one."

A tattooed hand is offering him a cup of fresh coffee. Gerard smiles up at Frank and gratefully accepts it. He cradles the warm porcelain

between his palms, letting the steam hit his nose and savoring it for a little while.

Frank sits down next to him. “Done with the upstairs boxes yet?”

“No, I have at least three left.” Gerard scowls at the one next to his feet and groans. “God, I hate books.”

“Sure you do,” Frank laughs and nudges him playfully in the shoulder. “But we can donate loads of things to a thrift store or something. Actually, I’ve sorted through some stuff already. I’ll get the box for you so you can check it first.”

He disappears into the kitchen and Gerard looks after him with a stupid smile on his face. Even though he’s lucky enough to have Frank with him he’s really going to miss the Allman-house. They’ve gathered a lot of nice memories here, like last Christmas when they invited both of their extended families. They ended up with a house so full of people that he and Frank had no other choice but to crash in the living room throughout the entire holidays (but then they also took advantage of having to sleep in front of the fireplace so that couldn’t have turned out more perfect).

It’s not like they’re selling the place though. The house is much too special and Gerard doesn’t have the heart to leave it in the care of somebody else. Instead they’ve agreed on staying primarily in the city, simply because that’s easier with Gerard’s new collaborations coming up and Frank’s second attempt at making it in the music industry. The Allman-house on the other hand will mostly be used in the summer and during the holidays. They will be coming back for sure but it still feels strange to move half of their things out.

“Here you go.”

Frank appears in front of him again, holding a smaller cardboard box filled with various useless things. Gerard picks his way through mismatched cutlery, old bottle openers and knitted potholders given to them by God knows whose aunt, and he’s about to declare the items worthless when he spots a familiar piece of jagged porcelain in between the layers of old newspaper. He frowns and digs it out. It’s the broken cup from the old coffee set. It’s Franklin’s cup. He’d almost forgotten all about it.

Frank raises an eyebrow at him. “You okay with letting go of this stuff?”

“Yeah... No, wait –” Gerard is about to hand the box back to him when he quickly changes his mind. “I think we should keep these.” He starts picking out the rest of the saucers and cups, saving them from their thrift store fate.

“What do you want those for?” Frank asks, puzzled. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen you use them. One of them is even broken.”

Gerard shrugs. “I guess I’ll keep them for sentimental value. Most likely these belonged to your grandfather so there’s a fun fact for you.”

“They could just as well have belonged to the Allmans,” Frank points out. “But hey, if you want them, keep them. It’s not like I mind.”

He puts the box away and sits down next to him again, moving a little closer this time so he can sneak his arm around his waist. The small gesture creates warm sparks in Gerard’s chest and his heart dances through a joyful somersault. If it were up to him he’d rather sit here for the rest of the day; screw carrying boxes and sorting things for the Salvation Army. These past few months he’s been happier than ever and it doesn’t even matter that he’s moving back to the bustling city. It feels like he has finally settled, like he’s anchored somewhere safe, and he knows Frank feels the same way.

“So now that you’re about to publish a comic and everything...” Frank rests his chin on Gerard’s shoulder, tracing absent circles on his back. “What’re you gonna write about next? Got any ideas?”

Gerard looks thoughtfully at the broken cup in his hand, carefully brushing his thumb over the jagged crack in the porcelain. Then he smiles and turns his head to steal a quick kiss.

“Yeah, maybe,” he says. “Maybe I’ll write about a ghost.”

– THE END

## End Notes

I received some absolutely wonderful bonus material for my fic:  
art by [amkave](#) and mix by [monkey\\_pie](#)! Please check them out!  
You can find links [here](#).

Works inspired by this one

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you  
enjoyed their work!